Radio Big World

Cathbad's Horn

A Garibaldian Tale

Joe & Frances Series

Blueprint for a Graphic Novel
We Describe You See

From an original idea by Caterina Perrone

RADIO BIG WORLD APS

Cathbad's Horn

A Garibaldian Tale – The Joe & Frances Series

From an original idea by Caterina Perrone

Media House &
Storytelling Academy

First published by Radio Big World APS Productions 2026

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First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

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Prologue

Set 1

The train is braking. It is stopping at Frankastle, Glowland County, Kentucky. A young man with reddish hair and a sturdy build steps off. Outside the station, a wagon is waiting for him, driven by a woman with a majestic black horse tied behind it. The locals are drawn to the animal but treat it with cautious reverence. The young man greets his horse, Nestor, but before mounting, he climbs onto the wagon seat and kisses his mother, Caroline. She asks how the Philadelphia horse fair went, and Joe says the fair was enormous, the biggest on the East Coast, but none of the mares, not even those with fabulous pedigrees, convinced him. She teases him about his obsession with finding a mare suitable for Nestor to start a new generation of war horses. As Joe climbs down from the wagon to mount Nestor, he answers affectionately that sooner or later he will succeed, and the President himself will award him a medal in front of Congress. A man who has just exited the station stops Joe right before he gets in the saddle. The man, who introduces himself as a passing doctor visiting a colleague, is struck by the horse and asks what breed it is. Joe says it is a cross between an Arabian horse champion and a Mustang mare captured in the wild by him.

The man asks if the horse is for sale, and Joe replies no. Even as a foal, Nestor spent more time with Joe than with his mother. So he has no intention of selling it. Nor is Nestor planning to change master. He and the horse are like brothers. The wagon sets off, and Joe rides alongside his mother to chat during the short trip to their ranch. The man who spoke with Joe asks a porter sitting under a pergola at the station for information about him. The porter says the woman is the wife of Senator Fergus McAllan, and the young man is her son Joe. The man is astonished. That young man is the son of the famous jockey? The porter confirms he is the elder of the two sons. The senator is also one of the top breeders of racehorses in the United States, as well as one of the largest landowners in the nation. By 1846, his wealth and influence has led to his election to Congress, and in 1860, he is still in office. As a politician, he often appears in the papers because McAllan is one of the major supporters of a soft and inclusive line toward Indians in response to the westward expansion of the frontier. But in Washington, few listen to him. If the states in the U.S. disagree on slavery, they are united on war against the Indians. Neither of the two sons has inherited their father's talent for racing horses, but Joe has become an exceptional trainer of war horses. Last month, a certain Lee from Virginia came to buy one. He is said to be a high-ranking military commander who, after serving in Texas, wants to side with the South—also because he owns a plantation with slaves. The man replies that slavery is legal in Kentucky. Do the McAllans own slaves too? The porter says no. Senator Fergus prefers dealing only with his beloved Native Indians.

Set 2

Along the road, Caroline asks Joe about his brother Ethan. He was with him in Philadelphia at the fair, but Ethan was looking for something different. He is now a well-known bookmaker who runs a massive betting operation, so he visited every stable to assess the potential of their best horses. In some cases, he even rode them to determine whether the specimen had the makings of a champion or not. They parted ways there, as Ethan continued on to Buffalo for a major racing event that also featured horses from Europe. Caroline inquires whether Ethan was wearing his usual boots in Philadelphia. Joe says yes. His brother's boots are always conspicuously too loose at the ankle and shin. It's part of his brand. When they went to the racetrack, his brother didn't fail to draw attention. And not just for the boots—or not only for those. Ethan, as usual, bet on impossible horses and won a handsome sum, which they used for a final dinner at a luxury restaurant downtown. His brother seems to have an exceptional nose for winning horses. Joe asks his mother if anything happened while he was away. Caroline sighs and tells him about the latest raid by a band of Indians who took some cows and a few horses. Among the stolen horses are two young purebred foals who, being offspring of champions, seemed to have a promising future in racing. Unfortunately, one of Joe's horses is also missing. Upon hearing his mother's words, Joe flies into a rage. He shouts, blaming everything on his father, and reminds her that, aside from his personal business of war horses—which is a niche in their enterprise's economy—it was once the racing branch that absorbed most of the resources on their farms. Then, by

explicit decision of his father, the cows took over. And with them came the Indians, who squat on their lands and leech off the family cattle—fattening themselves on what isn't theirs. Here, as across the rest of their properties. Caroline tries to defend her husband's position. The various ranches Fergus has gradually purchased are not for personal gain or hunger for dominance, but rather to provide a place of refuge for those Indians who, now defeated, have accepted the sovereignty of the Washington government. Joe knows this perfectly well. On these ranches, his father has built schools and hospitals for Indian children and the sick. He hires doctors and teachers at his own expense. Additionally, Indians on their ranches learn the white man's techniques of farming, ranching, metalworking, and carpentry by contributing their labor to the smooth operation of the farms. Joe insists that to support all these people, the McAllan farms have largely transitioned from raising horses for competition to large-scale cattle ranching. So now, on the racing side, the McAllan stables are no longer hotbeds of champions as they once were, having become, according to him, mere school camps for uncivilized, barbaric cattlemen. The McAllan racehorse business, the one that had brought them wealth, is declining because of the Indians that occupy so much of his father's thoughts. Cows are a much less profitable business than horses. The cattle also yield little, due to the very Indians his father harbors and protects. Raids by those loose bands of Natives, as recently happened, have become commonplace nowadays. Since he was a teenager, Joe has always criticized his father's permissive attitude toward these incidents. His father excuses them by appealing to Native American culture. He has never grasped this culture and has always harbored a strong dislike for it.

Set 3

As soon as he enters the house, after leaving Nestor in the care of the stablehands, Joe passes by a wooden statue of an Indian—the kind traditionally used to advertise cigars outside tobacco stores. A few years ago, it came as a blow to Joe when his father acquired it in New York and brought it home. Though the statue is of excellent workmanship, Joe considered it in poor taste from the beginning and strongly opposed the choice. In response to Joe's sixteen-year-old grievances, Fergus explained that the Indian sculpture was a gift for Ethan's coming of age. It had been personally selected by his brother. So, as far as Fergus was concerned, Joe had no grounds to object. In that moment, Joe realized that his brother, like their father, had also succumbed to the craze for Native Americana. Joe joins his father in the parlor, where he is entertaining a gentleman in a captain's uniform. They are discussing politics. The situation is delicate. Joe joins his father in the parlor, where he is entertaining a gentleman in a captain's uniform. They are discussing politics. The situation is delicate—North and South are at each other's throats. Unfortunately, it had been inevitable that the Southern states demanded secession from the Northern ones. Fergus reassures the captain that Kentucky, though a slave state, will remain in the Union and not join the others. The two men agree. However, it's not official, but everyone knows that in a matter of weeks, between the two federations of states, an inevitable war is about to break out—one that could have uncertain outcomes for both sides. That's why the captain has come directly to the McAllan farm: he wants to purchase an excellent war horse, as the conflict is expected to be long and bloody. Fergus introduces

his son to the officer, whose name is Ulysses Grant. After the usual pleasantries, Joe invites the captain to go directly to choose his future steed. Inside the war horse stables, which are separate from the racing stables, there are nine magnificent specimens of various colors and sizes. Joe explains that their build also reflects different temperaments and approaches to combat. Grant strokes each of the horses with admiration. Joe says his father has already spoken to him about the captain. Back when Grant was still a lieutenant, he made a name for himself in the war against Mexico about ten years earlier. He led a cavalry charge at the Battle of Resaca de la Palma, and he demonstrated his equestrian ability at the Battle of Monterrey by volunteering to carry a dispatch past snipers by hunging off the side of his horse, keeping the animal between him and the enemy. The captain is impressed. Joe continues. According to some confidential Congressional documents, it appears he will soon be promoted to colonel and placed in command of several regiments in Illinois. Grant looks surprised, as he is still unaware of his assignment. Joe speculates that the future colonel will be deployed on the western front of the war, between Kentucky, Missouri, and Mississippi. Those states are a mix of lowlands and uplands, so the ideal horse for a skilled rider like Grant can only be Cincinnati. Joe leads the captain to a rich chestnut horse that looks strong, elegant, and muscular—ideal for both endurance and battlefield agility. The captain is enchanted, and the horse also shows signs of empathy toward its potential future master. Joe explains that Cincinnati is the son of Lexington, the fastest four-mile thoroughbred in the country at his time, and grandson of the famed racehorse Boston. Both horses came from the McAllan farms and were brought to victory by his father Fergus. Cincinnati will prove calm under

fire, yet spirited in battle. The horse, as now, seems gentle in quiet moments but comes alive with the first sounds of war. Joe invites the captain to take a first ride on the horse and asks a stablehand to prepare Cincinnati for the ride while he goes to fetch Nestor, who is housed in a larger stall of his own. They ride through the paddocks where horses run free, pass by the training fields with obstacles and challenges, and finally reach the enormous racetrack carved beneath a small hill, where the thoroughbreds train. Captain Grant must admit that the ranch is truly vast. But what strikes him most is the number of Native Americans visible around the property. Some are perched on the fences, others sit in small groups, and others wander alone or in pairs across the estate. The situation is rather unusual, even for the captain, so he asks Joe how the McAllan fortune began.

Set 4

Joe recounts that his grandfather, Everard McAllan—a natural horseman from a young age—was born in 1775 in impoverished southern Ireland. By 1795, he had already established himself as a talented horse trainer. One day, in a pub in Kinsale, a town in County Cork, Everard read in the local gazette that the U.S. Army, led by the first President George Washington, had defeated a large Indian confederacy. As a result, the United States had annexed the Ohio River Valley. The prairies of the West were now open for settlement, and those territories were teeming with wild horses. He believed he could make a fortune by working as a horse trainer in America. Everard therefore decided to try his luck on the new continent. He bid farewell to his family

and secured free passage by working as a deckhand on a sailing ship loaded with Irish whiskey, departing from Limerick for Norfolk, Virginia. Upon arriving in port, he looked for a way to earn a few dollars and begin the journey to Ohio. While searching for work, Everard met some haulers whose wagons were full of barrels to unload. Seeing him buoyant and eager to work, they hired him to help. The barrels, filled with Kentucky-produced American whiskey, were destined for the South and had to be unloaded at the wharf. After completing the job and receiving his pay, Everard easily struck up conversation with the carriers by discussing liquor—a familiar topic thanks to his Irish heritage and the months he had spent aboard a whiskey-laden ship. In talking with those men, Everard learned that Kentucky lays just below the Ohio Valley and was a territory as rich in horses as Ohio. Moreover, Kentucky faced a shortage of horse trainers. So, as the haulers prepared to return to Kentucky, Everard asked to go with them. They agreed. Now in Kentucky, Everard found work on the farm of a small rancher of Irish descent. The small farm was the original nucleus of this same ranch. The owner had fought under General Wayne's orders at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in Ohio, where the Indians Everard had read about in Ireland were defeated. Everard fell in love with the rancher's daughter, his grandmother Marie Julienne, and she reciprocated his feelings. They married, and in 1805, they welcomed Fergus—their first and only son—destined to become, for twenty years, the most successful jockey between the United States and England. At just over seventeen years old, Fergus entered the world of horse racing and won numerous competitions across the United States. His victories made him a hero of American horse racing, especially the idol of gamblers. Between prizes and engagements, Fergus amassed a small

fortune. But that wasn't all—when his parents passed away, he inherited a sizable estate, which allowed him to significantly expand his property into one of the largest ranches in the state. When Fergus left racing, with the money he had won in competitions and the inheritance from his parents, he further expanded the family holdings and bought more ranches as the frontier moved westward. Once the story is finished, Joe invites the captain to launch his horse into a gallop. Grant gives a sharp nudge with his spurs, and Cincinnati bursts forward at full speed. Watching Grant gallop across the track, Joe drifts into memory—back to the moment his dream of becoming a jockey was dashed in adolescence. His height and build simply weren't suited for racing. Long legs made competition stirrups uncomfortable, and his weight rendered the skin-to-skin riding style, essential for speed, impossible. Thoroughbred racehorses also dislike saddles, which Joe would need to maintain balance at high speeds. At fifteen, Fergus stopped training him to compete with racehorses. However, his father continued to train his brother Ethan, and Joe was deeply disappointed to see him—who shares their father's build—riding swift stallions and launching himself into intense rides, while Joe had to follow at a distance on slower, taller, and stockier horses. Still, his younger brother has never shared their father's reckless racing spirit. As a jockey, Ethan hasn't come far. Better than him, anyway, considering thatJoe can't ride bareback and isn't capable of pushing a horse to its maximum speed the way Fergus does. It may be this disappointment—of failing to make his mark in the world of horse racing—that led Joe to develop his deep passion and remarkable talent for training war horses. Grant returns from his ride visibly satisfied with Cincinnati's gallop.

Set 5

Now, Joe explains, they'll test the horse in a simulated battle scenario. Joe and Grant head to an open field bordered on three sides by brushwood. In the distance, the tepees of the Indian camp can be seen. In the center of the field are low walls to clear, pits to avoid, and fences to jump. On the three wooded sides stand three towers, each manned. Two will simulate rifle fire with blank rounds, while the third will fire large firecrackers to simulate cannon blasts. Joe explains that, at his signal, both he and Grant will launch their horses across the field, forcing them to react to obstacles and noise, aiming to reach the opposite side as quickly as possible. A crowd of Indians of all ages gathers around the perimeter of the training area to watch the spectacle. Joe raises a hand, and the men in the towers signal they're ready. He gives the command, and the air fills with gunfire and explosions as the horses charge into the course. Joe and Nestor finish first with little effort, while Grant struggles slightly more but completes the trial successfully. Grant is now convinced that Cincinnati is the right horse for him, even if it's clear he doesn't have Nestor's mettle. He must nonetheless admit that Joe's reputation is well-deserved—he truly is one of the finest trainers in the country. As the spectators begin to scatter, Joe proposes returning to the ranch to give the horses a well-earned rest. Then they'll enjoy a good coffee with the biscuits his mother makes. On the way back, Grant asks Joe about his plans for the future. His father isn't young anymore, and sooner or later, it will be up to Joe to lead the family business. Joe thinks to himself that Ethan would probably be very upset—if he knew—about the plans Joe has for the future of the enterprise. He

explains to Grant that his vision, once he succeeds his father, is to drive the Indians off his land and confine them to some reservation guarded by federal troops. Then he wants to enter the business of breeding war horses to sell to the U.S. Army. He'd like to say that, ironically, the U.S. Army would use his horses against the Indians—but he refrains. Finally, thanks to his British relatives, he's determined to become a supplier to the British cavalry, which is far larger than the U.S. cavalry and can generate mountains of revenue. With the money earned from military contracts, he'll then relaunch the racing division, aided by his brother's, let's say, innate equestrian abilities.

Set 6

They return to the house, and Caroline invites Joe and his guest to the parlor, where coffee and pastries will be served. They find the senator seated in an armchair, reading the latest news from the papers that arrived that afternoon. Fergus asks Grant whether he enjoyed the tour of the ranch and, more importantly, whether he found among Joe's horses one that suits him. Grant thanks him and replies affirmatively, saying he's impressed by everything he saw and experienced throughout the afternoon. Not to mention that, wherever one turns, there are lush plants and flowers growing with astonishing ease. It's true what they say about this place: it's the most verdant ranch in the state. But something catches the captain's attention. On the wall of Fergus's trophies, he points to one that seems more special than the others—it's placed at the center of the collection, and the other trophies seem to orbit around it. It's the trophy won at the

Ascot Derby in 1830. Fergus earned two other victories at Ascot, but that first one was the most beautiful of all. That year, Fergus was hired by a little-known but well-funded London company backed by Ottoman capital, which owned a racehorse. When he arrived in England, Fergus discovered he would have to run the race on a horse that was a dud. Yet, despite the mediocrity of the animal, he managed to win. That prize is also special because, during the victory celebration, he met Caroline—then a lonely widow of a cavalry officer who had died in Afghanistan. Following his triumph at Ascot, Fergus secured work as a jockey for various races across the United Kingdom. Between victories, he found time to court Caroline, who was a few years older than him. At the end of his British tour, the two married and returned to live in America. In 1833, Joe was born, and three years later, they had their second son, Ethan. That's why that trophy stands out among all the others. Grant asks to be excused for a few minutes—he wants to freshen up after the ride. Once they're alone, Fergus asks Joe whether they've already begun discussing the price of the horse. Joe admits he hasn't brought it up yet. Fergus says that's fine. The horse will be given to Grant as a gift. Joe can't believe his ears. After all the time and effort spent raising and training him, now they're giving him away for free to a penniless captain, not yet appointed colonel—if he ever will be—who's been absent from the battlefield for ten years and has survived on odd jobs in the meantime. Has his father lost his mind? Fergus, unfazed, replies that the reason for the gesture is simple: according to Ethan, Grant will be the next President of the United States. Joe leaves the room shaking his head in disbelief. His father has truly gone mad. And his brother is well on his way to the asylum.

1

Chapter 1 - Yellowstone

Set 1

After saying goodbye to Grant, headed to Washington to resume active duty, Fergus remains on the porch and turns to Joe, who has just stepped outside, to tell him he has a favor to ask. One of his recent purchases is a giant plot of land in Wyoming Territory, almost as big as a state. Wyoming, much to Joe's disappointment, is Indian land. His father adds that he has gone deeply into bank debt to buy it because it is such a huge territory. Furthermore, he purchased the land without any prior exploration, relying solely on military maps, which only depict the frontier's boundaries. As a result, Fergus would like to ask Joe to visit that property and assess its actual size as well as its economic and commercial potential. Hearing Fergus talk like that, Joe becomes even more convinced that his father needs the care of a good psychiatrist—and if he doesn't act soon, that old lunatic will squander the entire family fortune. For now,

though, all he can do is say yes. At least he'd be with Nestor the whole time, surrounded by the army and cavalry. In those parts, they shoot Indians on sight, and if the time comes, he certainly won't hesitate.

Set 2

Joe and Nestor travel up the Ohio River to Louisville on a cattle steamer, and then up the Mississippi River to Omaha, Nebraska, the current frontier town, on another steamer. The railroad ends in Omaha, and most of the passengers and goods arriving here are military personnel and weapons. The McAllans' new lands are in Cheyenne, 800 kilometers away from Omaha. A military pass is required to cross the territory. Joe visits Army Headquarters and presents the official in charge with the documentation his father provided regarding the property and permits to inspect it. The official prepares a pass and gives him a map of the area, marking Cheyenne Fort's location and the various post stations along the way. The official explains that along the route to Cheyenne Fort, the last U.S. military outpost in the West, Joe will encounter fortified post stations run by military personnel. By showing his papers and proving his identity at these stations, Joe can secure food, water, and a place to stay for himself and his horse. The entire journey will take about ten days. Joe and Nestor set out. After traveling through Cherokee territory for many days without seeing any Indians, they arrive at the final established post station, looking forward to a good night's sleep. However, a sudden tremor shakes the ground in the middle of the night, waking them up and making

it impossible to fall back asleep. Determined to continue their journey, they set off again at dawn, with Cheyenne Fort still many miles away.

Set 3

As the sun dips below the horizon, Joe and Nestor arrive at Cheyenne Fort. The imposing closed gates loom before them. A sentry approaches, and Joe identifies himself, gaining entry. First, Joe introduces himself to the commander, who has already been alerted to his arrival by a military Pony Express and knows his father by reputation. The commander offers Joe accommodation within the fort. Curious about the previous night's events, Joe asks the commander if they had also felt the ground shaking. The officer replies that tremors are a common occurrence here, happening at least daily. He adds that the tremors seem to get stronger the further northwest you travel. After a night's rest, in the morning, Joe takes a tour of the fort. However, he first pays a visit to Nestor in the stables. While grooming Nestor, Joe discovers that in a cell carved out inside the stables, a little Indian boy is a prisoner. He tries to approach him and say something to him, but the child does not respond. Perhaps he does not know English. Joe then asks the commander for an explanation. The commander clarifies that they have accused the little boy of theft and are currently awaiting his trial. Curious to learn more, Joe discovers that a few years ago, the boy had already been a prisoner of the Americans for attempting to unseat a soldier during a prairie skirmish. However, he was just a child at the time, and they had sent him to a missionary

school for Native Americans in Colorado. After about four years, the now-teenage boy escaped the institution and returned to his tribe. It didn't last long. One week ago, the boy attempted to raid the fort at night, aiming to steal a horse and weapons. He entered under the cover of darkness, but a sentry discovered him, leading to his arrest. They are now waiting for a judge to preside over a court martial. Stealing weapons and supplies from U.S. Army soldiers is a serious federal offense punishable by death. The commander changes the subject and asks Joe, a famous warhorse trainer, to ride his steed because it occasionally throws a tantrum. Sometimes the horse bolts suddenly for no apparent reason. Joe rides the horse into the fort's courtyard, circling around while the soldiers take the boy outside for his daily air ration. The boy watches Joe intently. Abruptly, the horse rears up angrily, its reaction startling both Joe and the boy. Joe loses control of the horse and is about to fall off when the boy catches a blade of grass, blows on it, and makes a sound from it that instantly calms the horse, which stops and becomes quiet again. Joe gets off the animal and approaches the boy. The boy, in ungrammatical English, reveals to him that the horse does this because it has a foxtail in its ear that, depending on its movements, causes it more or less pain. The vibration of the blade of grass and the power of the Great Spirit reduced the pain the animal felt, allowing it to return to its quiet state. Joe, in disbelief, carefully scans the horse's ear. Despite his expertise, he sees nothing. The horse is examined by the regiment's lieutenant-veterinarian, who initially finds nothing amiss. Out of precaution, he then retrieves his ear endoscope and asks Joe to shine a lantern closely. Peering inside the auditory pavilion, he spots a strange, pointy shape. The lieutenant calls in four more men. They tie the horse with ropes, effectively immobilizing

it. Joe, with all his strength, holds down the animal's muzzle. The doctor takes a pair of large pliers and thrusts them into the horse's ear. Slowly at first, then more vehemently, he pulls out the foxtail. The horse, wracked with pain and in the throes of labyrinthitis, tries to neigh with all its might, but falls unconscious. Joe and the veterinarian stare in amazement at the extracted seed, wondering how it ended up lodged in the animal's ear. They suspect the seed pierced the horse's earwhile the animal was grazing in the tall prairie grass. But for Joe, a deeper doubt lingers. How did the boy become aware of the foxtail? He was an experienced rancher himself, and he couldn't fathom how a teenager could possess such specific knowledge. This question consumes him, and he seeks permission from the commander to visit the boy in the barn prison, where he awaits a very probable execution.

Set 4

The boy tells Joe that he learned English, albeit ramblingly, in the boarding school from which he had run away. He does not speak it well, but he can explain himself. His name is Tooantuh, and he is the grandson of a chieftain of the Shoshoni people. He didn't know his parents. A bison hunt had claimed his father's life. His mother had died giving birth to him. He was raised by his paternal grandparents. Like many other Indians, Tooantuh knows about horses because he grew up with them. He learned to ride them when he was just four years old, and he has not come down since. The boy shares with Joe the tales of capturing wild horses, the methods his tribe employs to train them, and

the adventures of hunting, war, and wild prairie rides without the use of a saddle, stirrups, or reins. Just what Joe can't do. Joe, enthralled by these stories of Native American life, begins spending a significant amount of time with the boy. He visits him day and night, bringing extra rations of food, a blanket, and clean water. Through their conversations, Joe sheds his preconceived notions. He comes to understand that Native Americans aren't savages but rather a collection of peoples, each with distinct cultures, traditions, and ways of life. Captured by Colorado's own militia, the boy endured harsh conditions at the "Christian" school that was supposed to civilize him. The Presbyterian missionaries and educators had no problem using truncheons, forced isolation, and physical and psychological punishment to forcibly convert him to Christianity and make him learn English words from books written by a guy named Shakespeare. He fled from those cruel individuals, fed up with the constant beatings and humiliations he endured simply for belonging to a different race or speaking a language other than their own. Plus, he hated shoes and ties, and he detested eating with a fork even more. He admits that his attempt to steal a few rifles and a couple of horses from the regiment had been a bad idea, but he was determined to return to his tribe with something he had stolen from the same white man who was taking land and animals that had once been theirs. He is proud and brave, so he does not fear death. In fact, he is happy to die as a hero to his people. Joe then becomes convinced that the boy deserves another chance. He writes a long letter to his father, explaining the situation and asking him to intervene. Because it is addressed to a congressional senator, the letter is sent to Washington by military mail, which leaves and arrives daily by courier. Days pass, but Joe's letter to his father goes unanswered.

Meanwhile, the judge and the clerk of the military court that will try the boy arrive. A makeshift courtroom is prepared in the warehouse, counsels for the parties are chosen, a jury is assembled, and the hearing opens. The duty of defending the boy falls to Joe. The judge begins the consultation with witnesses who describe the violence and heinousness of the armed Indians against the whites. The regimental commander, acting as a prosecutor, self-testifies about the attempted robbery and the boy's capture. Other soldiers briefly corroborate the officer's words. Despite Joe's best efforts, the fact that the boy was caught in the act of committing the crime is working against him. Recognizing that he cannot secure the boy's innocence, Joe makes an appeal to the boy's youth and his sincere intentions, driven by specific motivations. However, none are swayed. After the indictment, the jury almost immediately declares the boy guilty, and the judge sentences him to execution. They schedule the firing squad for the afternoon of the next day. Joe, that night, visits the boy in his cell, trying to console him and make it less difficult for him to accept the fact that he will lose his life the next day. But the boy remains steadfast in his courage. The soldiers set up a post near the stockade in the morning, planning to tie the boy there when the firing squad is summoned. Joe, disgusted by such a lack of humanity, has decided not to witness it and is prepared to leave both the fort and Wyoming—perhaps even the United States, if possible.

Set 5

Past noon, the preparations to carry out the sentence begin when, at great speed, the military courier arrives with an urgent

communication for the judge-martial. The President of the United States, through Senator McAllan's intercession, has granted the prisoner a pardon. The presidential envelope also contains a petition for release and an order for the commander to give the boy a horse and food to return to his tribe. The boy receives his freedom and a horse. After leaving the fort, the boy invites Joe to follow him to meet his people. Joe, curious, accepts. Despite being on McAllan property, Joe must seek permission from the commander to enter the Indian lands on the frontier. The military warns Joe of the dangers, but Joe is determined to go. They make arrangements for ten days. If Joe did not return by the tenth day, the entire regiment would move in search of him, with orders not to take prisoners. And at the word of a U.S. cavalry officer, they would take none. Not least because having the disappearance of a senator's son on his record meant for the commander to say goodbye to a career just beginning. No. Nothing would happen to Joe as long as he was under George Armstrong Custer's charge. The boy and Joe walk northwest toward the mountains. For the first time, Joe witnesses the pristine prairies of the West, their herds of bison disappearing into the horizon. They camp under the stars and sleep around the fire for three days. Then, on the fourth morning, at the foot of the mountains, Joe and the boy awaken with a dagger to their throats. These are the vanguard warriors of the boy's tribe. Speaking in their language, the boy not only identifies himself, but he also explains to the warriors who Joe is and what he has done for him. One of the warriors runs to break the news to the camp. Joe, the boy, and the warriors resume their journey. Late at night, they start to see the camp's first lights from a distance. There seems to be great excitement. Festive shouts and songs of joy greet them as

they arrive, with meat cooking on the fire and everyone dressed in their festival clothes. His family—not just any family, but the family of one of the chiefs whose grandson the boy is—re-embraces him. On this occasion, the family presents Joe with his most comfortable teepee. Then the festivities commence, with a great deal of curiosity surrounding Joe and his striking red hair. With the boy acting as an interpreter, people eat, drink strange concoptions, and smoke tobacco to the sound of drums, until suddenly everyone falls silent. Joe, for a moment, does not understand what is going on, but then realizes that out of the pitch blackness of the prairie has come a woman holding a feathered stick. Her manifestation was enough to silence everyone. The boy explains to Joe that the woman is the tribe's shamaness and the most powerful of all the Indian tribes. The woman lives alone in a mountain cave and never shows up or comes down. No one has warned her about the party; consequently, her appearance is a bad omen. The shamaness walks confidently toward Joe and points her feathered staff at him. The woman orders him, in some Indian language, to go with her early the next morning. After receiving a translation, Joe responds that this is not feasible. Tomorrow he must pack up and go back to the fort because it takes 5 days to return, and if he is not at the Cheyenne within 10 days of his departure, the soldiers will come looking for him and attack anyone in their way. The shamaness listens to the boy's words as he retranslates them from English, then dryly retorts his order, admitting no response. Joe would like to retort, but the boy waves for him to be silent. One cannot contradict the shamaness. Early in the morning, Joe and all of the tribe's chiefs and warriors must go with her. When she is sure that everyone has understood, the shamaness disappears back into the prairie, and Joe notices that

the party is over. Everyone is putting things back and retiring to their tents. So it is decided: tomorrow morning they will go after that woman, who must be very powerful if she can get even the tribal leaders to obey her. Joe decides to stand by the events and goes to bed. While Joe is in his tent under a bison-skin blanket, a coyote howls in the night.

Set 6

The next day, at dawn, Joe hears a call from outside the tent. Half asleep, Joe emerges and faces the boy and the shamaness. Four senior leaders, including the boy's grandfather, accompany them. They tell him that they are already ready to leave. Joe swiftly puts on his clothes, and soon after, he is already riding Nestor. The chiefs, Joe, and the boy make their way to the top of the mountains while the shamaness follows them on foot. On the way up to the plateau, it goes without saying that they had spaced her out quite a bit, and in fact, when Joe turns around, he no longer sees her. Joe asks the boy for an explanation, prompting the boy to question the leaders, who had been silent up until that point. The grandfather replies, and the boy translates that the shamaness has the power to transform into many animals, including the coyote. The shamaness, therefore, is not behind but has most likely passed ahead of them for quite some time now. In fact, at the end of the trail, the shamaness is already there, waiting for Joe and the others. She is standing on a plateau's ridge with a depression in the middle, and she shows them the enchanted spectacle of the valley below. Joe sees lakes of steaming hot water that are deep blue, golden yellow, or

red in color, surrounded by puffs of water and steam coming up from underground at regular intervals. Joe has never seen anything like that in his life. Even to him, it is obvious that this is the caldera of a volcano bubbling under the surface, covered with trees, meadows, and sulfur springs. Joe dismounts his horse, and the shamaness leads him on foot to the center of the valley, with the chiefs and the boy translating behind them. The woman begins to tell the legend that cloaks the place. Long, long ago, great wizards with golden and copper hair emerged from the sea, riding the waves. They taught our shamans great secrets, and our shamans taught them. The result was a brotherhood that wanted to combine the magical knowledge of the foreigners and that of the Indian shamans to reach a higher level of consciousness. A level that the native Indians call "Great Spirit." But evil foreign sorcerers refused to give up their old magical practices. Their magic gave them great powers, but it did not allow spiritual growth. They weren't interested in growth at all. Only in power. So, during a great joint assembly of magicians and shamans, they rose up against their own brethren and vowed to wipe out the entire Indian nation. They took the sea route and, on a faraway island, plunged into the hot bowels of the earth. They then emerged from a fiery mountain in the form of animals made of a metal never seen on the surface: a kind of indestructible white gold. These monstrous animals were extremely strong and raging. They set out to ravage every land inhabited by Indians, causing devastation even in the lands of the golden-haired and copper-haired people. Sometimes they struck together, but more often they attacked individually. The strongest and most powerful of these beings specifically targeted Indian lands. It was a large bison; it destroyed villages, set fire to the plains where some tribes were camped, and hunted

men, women, and children, crushing them with its weight. The warriors' bravery and dexterity were of no use, nor did any weapon work on the golden beasts. To defeat them, magicians and shamans gathered again and went to the north to use their joint magics and connect to the Great Spirit. They succeeded, returned with new powers, and used these to successfully trap the bison. The beast struggled with all its might, but the new powers of the magicians and shamans were superior to its own. When they arrived at this location, the magicians and shamans had the earth opened, swallowing the animal. All that remained of him was a horn that the leader of the light-haired wizards had managed to break during the fight. The white gold that the bison was made of was a special metal that did not melt even with the heat of the earth. Therefore, since then, the Golden Bison has been lying buried under these rocks and seething with rage, waiting for its revenge. As the boy translates the legend, Joe can't resist the thought that the shamaness is narrating a mythical story that actually alludes to real-life natural events that maybe really happened, namely the fall of some meteorites and perhaps the last eruption of this volcano. Joe, after these considerations, expresses a conscious thought: "Come on, old woman, tell me something I don't know." As if the woman has picked up on this thought, the shamaness responds in flawless English, "Young man, now you will hear something you do not know and would never have imagined." Joe jerks in amazement at the shamaness' words, and she undauntedly continues to tell her story in English. To safeguard this area, the wizards and shamans have positioned totem animals. The wizards and shamans have created an invisible cage for this captive entity, who is sensitive to vibrations. Its horns clashing on the walls of this vibrational

cage are at the origin of the occasional thundering and tremors Joe has experienced. The bisons' hooves on the prairie floor generate the vibrations that jail the golden beast. If humans overhunt them, predators threaten them, or a disease kills them, the vibration will fade out. The Golden Bison, burdened with centuries of rage, will escape its cage, emerge from the ground, and ravage the prairies, eradicating all living species, including humans. Joe asks why the golden bison is trying to get out. The woman replies that while the Indians had been, all along, guardians of the bisons' optimal health, the white man is killing bisons by the thousands to strike at the heart of the Indian Nations and subjugate them by destroying their most important source of livelihood. Joe agrees, recalling newspaper pictures of white hunters sitting on mountains of bison carcasses. It's clear to him, without needing to be a state's accountant general, that the bison would soon be extinct. Yet, a question lingers: what should he do? "Do you remember the broken horn of the Golden Bison?" asks the shamaness. "Well, with that horn, the wizards and shamans, combining their powers, fashioned a wind instrument that, when played in the presence of the bison, enabled them to live longer and reproduce more and faster, so as to quickly re-blood the population whenever it went below the guard level." The other monsters had also been imprisoned around the world in the bowels of the earth, and they, too, had been locked up in a prison protected by totem animals: cougars, white bears, raptors, and seals. It was decided that the light-haired wizards should keep the horn in their countries, where they would also make it available to shamans when needed. When disease struck the totem animals or food became scarce, they would bring in the horn and play it to restore the health and numbers of the guardian animals. The horn

would then resume its journey to the sea. This time, however, the white man is everywhere, killing too many animals that can't reproduce and grow fast enough to replace the dead ones. We have our own problems here, but so do the other wizards, who have been passing from one generation to another the job of being the monsters' guardians for centuries. We all urgently require the horn's assistance, but currently, we have limited options: the horn vanished at the beginning of the century, and its whereabouts remain unknown. Without the horn, the Golden Bison and all the other beings buried in the volcanoes will eventually break free. Very soon." Joe would like to inquire with the shamaness about the total number of these evil wizards and their final resting place. But the shamaness falls silent, exhausted. One of the chiefs gestures to remount their horses and return to camp.

Set 7

Joe, riding toward the plains, does not have the courage to externalize the thousand perplexities generated by that experience. The boy joins him in his reverie, inquiring about his thoughts on the shamaness' story, and Joe confesses his confusion over what he has witnessed and heard. He first wonders why the woman, at one point, started speaking English. The boy answers that the shamaness has the power to speak many languages. She knows all the West and East Indian languages, so it is easy for her to know the language of the whites as well. Joe is also curious as to why the shamaness chose to share that particular story with him. According to the boy, it is perhaps because Joe is the only white

man who has ever come to the Golden Bison Prison. And without coming in full battle gear—in fact, having saved the life of an Indian. Joe retorts that the shamaness, unaware of his arrival, came down the mountain specifically to meet him. The boy shrugs his shoulders and admits he has no idea why. The party arrives at the camp; it is already evening. In the dark, Joe cannot leave the camp. However, he has an early start the next day to try to reach Fort Cheyenne as soon as possible. Without his arrival in four days, the soldiers would begin their raids. The tribeswomen offer him bison stew and Wanige, a bitter-tasting drink he has never tried before, which helps him get a good night's sleep, and then Joe retires to his tent to rest. In the middle of the night, Joe's eyes suddenly open. He feels dazed, but he senses that there is a presence in the tent. Someone has entered. He attempts to rise from the bed but finds himself immobilized, his muscles appearing numb. Then he sees a spark, and magically suspended in the air, an orb of light lights up. At that point, Joe recognizes the shamaness figure. The woman sits up, raising her skirt above her knees, so Joe can see the marks of an ugly scar that goes all the way up her thigh. Joe asks what the woman is doing in his tent, and she replies that she has come to entrust him with the task of retrieving the golden horn and bringing it back to her, who will play it again, trying to get the numbers of bison and other guardian animals back to an acceptable level. Joe asks why she thinks he, of all people, would be the right person to retrieve the object. The woman responds that he is Irish and that the horn was kept in Ireland before it vanished. He has to start his quest from there, and his Irishness will be at hand. Joe finds it difficult to understand the connection between a Native American artifact and Ireland. The woman responds without hesitation, stating that the famous blond- or red-haired

wizards who came into contact with the Indians and together fought and defeated those monsters were none other than Celts and Vikings. Joe thinks the woman is crazy if she believes the Vikings were in America before Columbus. Joe asks what would happen if the horn no longer existed. The shamaness answers that it is impossible. It is a magic horn made of an indestructible material. Therefore, that instrument is somewhere, and Joe must find it before it is too late. Time is running out because it is true that the horn allows replenishing bison numbers, but only by accelerating and amplifying natural phenomena. It is of no use if white men continue to kill bison at the present rate. If the disaster is primarily due to the actions of white men, what can Joe do to prevent it? The woman responds by suggesting that Joe should ask his father to expedite the implementation of restrictions on white hunters in the area, thereby delaying the bison eradication process and providing a time buffer for both her and Joe. Joe is surprised. How does the shamaness know about his father? The woman does not answer the question. She does, however, take from a bag she carried at her side a piece of paper folded in two parts. The back bears the name Midleton, County Cork, the village where Joe's grandfather originated. The shaman opens the paper and reveals that it contains, painted, the sacred symbol of the bison. When Joe is in Ireland, he will figure out to whom to deliver it. From there, his search will begin. Joe responds by pointing out that the horn could be anywhere. The shamaness reassures him that she will guide him. But to find it, Joe will need help. That is why the leaders have chosen the boy to accompany him. Joe, still paralyzed, stammers confusedly before finding the courage to ask why she thinks she is entitled to entrust him with this task. The woman lowers her gaze, almost hesitating to answer, then, in a low voice, declares, "Because I

am your aunt." At that point, the orb of light goes out, and the tent plunges into darkness. There is a rasping sound between the skins, followed by footsteps in the grass that get faster and faster as they move away. Joe's body gradually resumes its normal movement, while a distant coyote howls in the direction of the mountains.

2

Chapter 2 - Washington DC

Set 1

Early the next morning, Joe and the boy set out, greeted by the whole tribe, and begin their return journey. A troop of warriors escorts them throughout the first day, after which they continue the journey alone. Joe repeatedly asks the boy about the shamaness—who she is, where she comes from, and why she is there—but the boy does not know much about her. The shamaness is the Golden Bison's guardian. He has known her all his life but knows little about her as a person because the elders or the leaders of the tribe have never spoken too much about her, partly out of reverence and partly out of fear. Joe, on the other hand, wonders why, if it were true what the shamaness had said, his father had kept him in the dark about the fact that he had an aunt, and that this aunt had become an Indian. Perhaps it wasn't appropriate to disclose this information to the public, but why not to him? After a few days of travel, Joe and the boy,

who have been on the plains for some time, are assaulted by a shotgun blast. Nestor, trained as necessary, gets on the ground to protect his master, while Joe, holed up behind him, draws his carbine. The boy, meanwhile, has taken cover on his own and crouches invisibly in the grass. Joe does not understand where the gunfire came from. The gunfire likely originated from bison hunters who mistakenly thought they were Native Americans. He is about to return fire when he hears, in the distance, an order that can only be military. As a result, Joe attaches a white rag to the carbine and waves it in the direction of the discharges, shouting at the top of his voice not to shoot. The shooters are the fort's commander and his regiment, who have gone out to find Joe. In fact, Joe exceeded the agreed-upon delay by two days. Joe and the boy, along with the soldiers, reach Fort Cheyenne, recounting their experience with the natives but avoiding to mention the shamaness.

Set 2

After a few days' rest, they resume their route to Omaha, and from there, via the river, they reach Kentucky and stop at the McAllan Ranch. But it is only a technical stop. Joe greets his mother, Caroline, and tells her about his trip west, but without mentioning his aunt's story. While staying at the McAllan house, the boy assists Caroline with gardening and wool balls, and he appears to be very interested in the Indian statue. His mother likes the boy, and he seems to be comfortable with her. Not least because she allows him to walk barefoot. Poor guy, Joe thinks of him, knowing that the boy lost his parents when he was just

a toddler. Then a few days later, he leaves Nestor at home under the care of the stable boys at the family stable and, with the young Indian, heads to Washington to meet and confront his father.

Set 3

When Joe and the boy arrive in the capital, they stop at the McAllan residence, where, however, they find only servants. The senator is in parliamentary session and has left the house early in the morning with his politician's briefcase, which he always carries with him. The Southern states have declared war on the Union. Congress is thus perpetually in session. Joe does not care how serious the political situation is; he must talk to his father at all costs and clarify every detail of the matter. He therefore shows up at the Capitol and gets himself announced. His father emerges from the chamber session and encounters Joe in a Senate lounge. Joe is not lost in speeches. Is it accurate to say that his father has a sister? Is it possible that his aunt belongs to an Indian tribe? If so, why has he never told him about it? The father is not denying it. He knew that by sending Joe to Wyoming, the meeting with his aunt, while unlikely, might happen. In fact, knowing his sister, she would be the one to make it happen. The father recounts. Fergus is not an only child. He has a sister named Johanna, who is two years younger. While he excelled in horse racing as a young man, Johanna excelled in her studies. Her father had spared no expense and found her the best tutors on the market to prepare her for high school at a Boston girls' boarding school. Then, seeing her intelligence and

achievements, he had her continue her studies at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri. At the time, it was the only women's university in the entire United States. Johanna graduated with honors in anthropology, specializing in Native Americans. She was familiar with their legends, traditions, customs, and habits, and she could even speak fluently in some of the major language strains of the Native Americans' linguistic family. After graduation, Johanna spent a few years at the university as a researcher. In 1830, she was called to Illinois to work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. At the time, the Mississippi River was the border between the United States and Indian nations. She met a young representative in the Illinois Assembly, with whom she became engaged. They were arranging their marriage when, in 1832, the young congressman decided to enlist in the state militia to fight Black Hawk, chief of the Sauk Indians. The Indian chief had sent a peaceful delegation to Illinois to protest the white occupation of their lands, but his representatives were shot, so the chief-warrior decided to return fire with fire and attacked U.S. forts and villages. The congressman, with the rank of captain, fought that war, which the Indians lost, forcing them to retreat forever across the Mississippi River. But when the congressman returned, he no longer found Johanna waiting for him. She had renounced her job, her fiancé, the United States, and even the white race, due to the shameful and unfair conditions imposed on the Natives in the peace treaty she was asked to draft as clerk of the Bureau. Johanna had taken a few books and a horse with her, and had gone to stay with the Indians. She went from tribe to tribe to help the natives in their struggle for survival and to study them even more closely. Johanna's abandonment left an indelible mark on the congressman, who would not soon recover and would

not marry until many years later. Joe then asks his father why he didn't inform him and his brother about this incident. Was he ashamed of having a sister who broke off an engagement? Or was he trying to hide the fact that a U.S. Senator's relative had gone to stay with the savages? The father replies that they have maintained strict secrecy about the affair to safeguard the young man's emotional intimacy and prevent it from affecting his career. Because Johanna's boyfriend was Abraham Lincoln. Joe is thunderstruck. The actual president at the White House had once betrothed his aunt. It is now clear to him why his father kept silent with his sons for all this time. If Abraham's opponents had known about the broken marriage because his fiancée had run off with the Indians, Lincoln's career would have been ruined. Vignettes, satire, and personal attacks in the popular press would have humiliated him and tarnished his public image. And his father's too. Fergus had never met Lincoln when he was engaged to Johanna, because he was then in England competing and trying to win Caroline's love. He had met him years later in Washington, when he was newly a senator and Lincoln sat in the House. They understood each other immediately. Both of them were abolitionists, driven by their rejection of slavery, and they shared a connection—albeit in different ways—with the same woman who had escaped from their lives. Anyway, she had not disappeared into the wilderness forever. In fact, Johanna keeps in touch with her brother on a regular basis through letters she sends from the farthest reaches of the frontier. The recipient, of course, pays the postage. But it's free since Fergus is in the Senate because mail addressed to members of Congress is gratis. At one such post office in Missouri, Fergus—then a senator—had once brought in the local sheriff to investigate who had mailed the

letters sent to Washington. The clerk reported that it was an Indigenous woman, dressed in traditional Indian style but speaking perfect English. He recalled a strange detail, however: no one had seen her arrive, and no one had seen her leave. A woman on foot cannot simply vanish into thin air. Fergus, who loved his sister and read her letters with rapt attention—letters that resembled long, detailed accounts of her life among various tribes (never naming them or revealing their location)—fully embraced the Indian cause, thanks to his sister's emotional reports. He sought to soften the trauma of a war that, for the Native peoples, had been lost from the outset. Since his father's inheritance also belonged to Johanna, Fergus, by mutual agreement with his sister, redirected the family's economic policies to serve the needs of those who had once owned the land that was now theirs—while striving not to lose money in the process. Johanna is not only sending mail but also receiving it. She needs mostly blank diaries and journals to write her ethnographic notes. And stationery to answer her brother. Sometimes she asks for a few tools, such as a knife or hatchet, as well as books or pieces of cloth. Every month, Fergus, along with a letter, sends his sister a package containing everything she requests. The Cherokee Agency, a branch of the federal Indian Affairs Agency, is the package's destination. Previously, the agency was located in Calhoun, Georgia. Then, when, in the mid-1830s, the Cherokee were largely reallocated to what would later become Oklahoma, the agency was moved to North Carolina. It is there, now, that Johanna wants to receive her packages. Johanna probably first settled with the Cherokee, one of the so-called "five civilized tribes," but that was his guess. In fact, many Cherokee had been granted permission to remain on their ancestral lands around the Appalachian Mountains. As a people,

they are settled farmers who have become so Europeanized that they are now almost fully integrated into white society. Therefore, it makes sense that Johanna initiated her coexistence with the natives by first interacting with the Cherokee people of Georgia. Not least because she had to be accepted by them. If Johanna is a shamaness today, it means that in that early stage of her new life, she was able to integrate with the Indians. Perhaps this was also why she later followed some Cherokee groups along the Trail of Tears—that is, the long way to the new territories to the west—and settled in the lands beyond the Mississippi River. If Joe has met her in Wyoming, it means that, from tribe to tribe, she has moved up north. But parcels continue to be wanted at the agency. According to the local Commissioner of Indian Affairs, the parcels are always picked up by someone different—a man, a man and a woman, a woman and a child—but all holding a properly written and signed proxy. Through this close correspondence, Fergus and his sister run the family business together. In the end both siblings inherited the business in equal shares. Fergus, therefore, cannot dispose at his own willthe management of the family fortune. That's why the McAllan brothers, on their ranches, provide sanctuary to individuals who have fled or relocated due to Whites' pressure or violence. They endeavor to equip these individuals with essential resources such as jobs, education, and security to survive what is now the flood wave of North American colonization, which will undoubtedly overwhelm all Indian nations. Extensive cattle ranching, if not as profitable as selective horse ranching, is nonetheless a worthwhile business and serves to accustom the Natives to what is the only economic prospect the western plains allow: ranching. Those lands are more suitable for cattle ranching than for agriculture, and it

is much simpler to transport and sell heads of cattle or entire herds of bovids than horses. The revenue makes it possible not only to repay the expenses of maintaining the ranches, but also to find funds for the very expensive court cases that the tribes file in the federal courts to try to defend their rights. Needless to say, the firm Lincoln & Herndon of Springfield, Illinois, often handles those lawsuits. Lincoln, who is by then no longer a lawyer but president, has given him permission to buy the huge ranch in Wyoming, specifically to maintain peace with the many Indian peoples of the Plains and Rocky Mountains for as long as possible. That is also why he had obtained a presidential pardon for the boy in a flash. Joe asks his father if he wrote to his aunt about his arrival at the frontier, but his father is convinced that he did not.

Set 4

Joe still has one final piece of the puzzle to unravel: the volcano on the verge of eruption. Nevertheless, he chooses to keep the story of the Golden Bison a secret from his father. He has now concluded that his aunt, thanks to a lethal concoction of Indian legends and European fictional literature, is slightly insane—and he has no intention of being seen as mad himself. He then asks his father if he knows of a geologist in Washington who has experience and knowledge of the West. Joe justifies his meeting with the geologist by stating that Wyoming is abundant in agates and other crystalliform minerals, and he is also exploring the possibility of finding diamonds. It would be an excellent opportunity to repay his father's significant investment. The

senator takes him to his office, where he presents him with Prof. Oliver Merk's Smithsonian Institute business card. If anyone knows anything about American geology, it's him. Joe goes to the Smithsonian and, with his father's credentials, gets a brief interview with Prof. Merk. Joe asks him if he has ever been to the West, and the professor replies in the negative despite having read as much material as he could find on the geology of the western part of the North American continent: explorers' reports, accounts of trappers and travelers, and military and civilian reconnaissance. However, given the dense Indian presence, those places are off-limits for any kind of field research. Joe, without revealing where he had been or what he had seen with his aunt, asks Merk if he thinks it is possible that north of the Rocky Mountains there is an active volcano. If Joe is anticipating a volcano similar to those depicted in popular illustrations, the professor responds, "No." If such a volcano were active, it would periodically produce smoke columns a few miles high, and someone would have likely observed them. Despite this, a giant tuff formation, named Huckleberry Ridge after its discoverer, stretches from Missouri to California, from Canada to Texas. Volcanic eruptions deposit large amounts of ash, forming the volcanic rock known as tuff. Therefore, Huckleberry's hypothesis, as well as his own, is that somewhere in the Northwest lies the now-collapsed caldera of that supervolcano, which, in a single eruption, produced such enormous quantities of ash that it covered half the continent. Even if no lava lakes are visible, this does not necessarily mean the volcano is extinct. It is simply that the lava is waiting in a magma chamber, just below the debris of its own caldera. Joe asks what would happen if that volcano erupts again today. The professor looks puzzled. The lava would spread for many

miles around, destroying whatever it finds in its path. However, magma wouldn't pose a significant threat in the Northwest, where bears, bison, and a few Indians are the only inhabitants. The ash, if anything, is the problem. A cloud of ash shot from a supervolcano would darken the skies of the United States and Canada for months. The cloud would create a shield for the sun by abruptly lowering temperatures on the ground, irreparably damaging vegetation and crops for several seasons in a row. The toxic ash's slow fallout would poison the air and water sources for many months, if not several years, killing humans and animals. The entire continent would eventually be uninhabitable. It would be the end for the United States and North America. But the professor reassures Joe. There is a one-in-a-million chance that this will happen, assuming the supervolcano really exists because no white man, so far, has ever discovered it. Joe, on the far side of the door, asks Merk if there is anything in man's power to stop a volcano from erupting. The professor smiles and reminds him that in 79 AD, not even the full might of Titus, who had even destroyed the temple of God in Jerusalem, was able to stop the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Set 5

Joe, on his way out, finds the Indian boy who was waiting for him outside the building. Together, they walk along the banks of the Potomac River. Joe reflects on himself. Aunt Johanna, half-crazy in her own right, is now undoubtedly completely sickened by nearly thirty years in the wilderness, and one can

therefore understand the confusion she has made in her head by mixing science and fiction. But he has seen with his own eyes that puffing former caldera, perhaps the first white eyes to do so, excluding, of course, his aunt. Moreover, he felt earthquake tremors throughout his stay in Wyoming. Maybe they were due to some other kind of cause. But what if those tremors were a warning of an impending eruption? If that were the case, there was no way to avert the catastrophe. Joe turns to the boy and asks if, to him, it is credible that the shamaness, by blowing that golden horn, could stop the Golden Bison's exit. But he doesn't care about the answer. Joe's curiosity to see for the first time the land where his grandfather emigrated from and where his ancestors came from is so great that he is willing to go even for that. But if his crazy aunt is right, recovering that horn, assuming it ever existed or still exists, is the only chance left to save the Indians and, with them, the United States. Joe is committed to embarking on and accomplishing the assigned task. In the evening, Joe, the boy, and his father are at dinner. Joe then tells his father the whole story of the trip to Wyoming, avoiding the more strictly "magical" details. He tells him about the earthquakes, the smoking caldera he saw, and the fear of a mega-eruption with devastating effects. He also tells him that his aunt had asked him to go to Midleton in County Cork and, from there, follow a trail to retrieve a phantom object that would be able to stop the eruption. The father asks what the object is. Joe explains that it's some kind of musical instrument the Vikings allegedly brought to Europe from America. He knows it sounds absurd—just picturing horned-helmeted warriors landing on American shores is enough to make him smirk—but his aunt had told him exactly that. The father, however, does not smile sarcastically. On the contrary, he asks Joe to follow him to

the library. In the room, the father shows Joe a shelf crammed with books. It's the personal library that his aunt left behind during her escape. Apart from historical and ethnographic texts on Native Americans, many of the books concentrate on the history, traditions, legends, and customs of the Celts and Vikings, as well as the Norse sagas. In particular, within the latter, Auntie had marked passages that mentioned Vinland, the land of wine, a land across the sea reached several times by the heroes of Scandinavian mythology. Aunt's dissertation was precisely her own investigation of Indian legends, in search of clues to suggest that the Vikings had indeed arrived in America and made contact with the natives. According to her, if that had happened, there had to be some traces in the legends. Johanna discovered these traces despite the academic community's disregard for her findings. Everyone else firmly backed the Columbian primacy theory. Joe'sfather then takes a book from the shelf. The book, a catalog of the Smitshsonian Museum's non-exhibit collections, clearly states on its cover: Highly Confidential. In a section dedicated to Celtic artifacts, two remarkable discoveries stand out: the top and bottom of a flute, which are actually two distinct flutes, one made of ivory and the other of iron. Both have an ouroboros embossed on the back: behind the mouthpiece, the ivory one, and below the exit hole, the iron one. Although the ouroboroi are somewhat ruined, one can still discern their shape: a circle of three snakes biting each other's tails. The father explains that the iron relicwas fished out near the shores of an island in the Aegean waters. The Smithsonian purchased it from a junk dealer's stall in Athens, while a Pennsylvania excavation on the shores of Lake Erie uncovered the ivory artifact a few years ago. So it's not so absurd to assert that someone from Europe—perhaps from a

Nordic or Celtic culture—came to America before Columbus. He received the book, which was restricted to museum employees only, because the institution owed him for helping to facilitate a large federal grant that led to the construction of The Castle, the very building where Joe had met Merk. His aunt is not insane, if that's what Joe wants to know. Joe's father pulls a sealed envelope from the book. He tells him to stop by the Smithsonian again and give this to the secretary at the front door. At this point, Joe passes him the message from his aunt to hurry up and enact a law to protect Yellowstone's territory and prohibit or limit its bison hunting. His father replies that he has already prepared a draft bill to present to Congress. But the House has other headaches to solve right now. Joe requests updates on the status of the bill while he is in Europe. He doesn't know how long he will stay there. In fact, leaving for Ireland is no problem; from New York, in a fortnight, he would arrive at his destination. If he does not find what he is looking for, he will go back quite soon. On the other hand, if he found a lead, he would continue with his search that could endure indefinitely.

Set 6

The next day, Joe goes to an agency and buys two one-way tickets from New York to Cork. Meanwhile, his father opens a deposit for him at Wells Fargo & Co., America's largest bank, with branches, offices, and correspondents throughout Europe. Joe, for his trip, has full financial backing. Joe then stops by the Smithsonian and delivers the letter. The secretary asks him to excuse her for a second, and, after a while, she returns with an

attendant. The man, in white gloves, asks Joe to follow him, and without a word, he takes him to a basement where, as far as the eye can see, there are shelves, cabinets, and stacks of crates. Still in silence, the man, who has the letter in his hand, opens it and reads a coded number written on a small card. He walks to a shelf, opens it, and hands Joe a wrapper. The man, without speaking, signals him not to open it and takes him back to the exit. Joe puts the package in a leather bag that he brought with him at his father's suggestion and momentarily forgets about it. The trip is two weeks away, and it is close to Easter. Joe, his father, and the boy return to Kentucky for the holiday. Fergus advises Joe not to say anything about his aunt to Caroline or Ethan, because she and his brother are still in the dark about the whole affair. It is a hard blow for Caroline to learn of Joe's departure. She is very close to her sons, and separating from them is not easy. She loves them so much that in the nursery, left untouched from their childhood, she still keeps the crib where they slept. At first, she tries to object and dissuade Joe, but after much crying and recommendations, she comes to terms with it. Joe is partly surprised. His mother never made a fuss about Ethan regularly leaving for Europe after a race or an equestrian event. Why is there so much drama surrounding his own departure? His mother, convinced that Joe is going to Europe on a tour to discover his origins, leaves him a series of letters of introduction for his closest relatives and friends in England. That way, should he plan to take a tour of London, he would know who to go to. She also recommends that he write to her from time to time. Their last days in Kentucky are a frantic preparation for departure. Joe's mother has set up an entire wardrobe for the boy, complete with shoes that the boy hates. There are also new clothes for Joe, since Caroline does not want them to look bad in Europe.

After all, Joe is a US senator's son and the boy is the grandson of a tribal chieftain. Joe remembers the wrapper he left in the bag when he closes his suitcase. He opens it, and to his amazement, he sees the two half flutes. He touches the two ouroboroi and realizes that they are made of metal but not iron. Moreover, although the oxidation does not allow him to guess what metal they are, it is evident that the two ouroboros are made of two different metals from each other. Despite their compatibility, the damage to the two pieces prevents their combination. Joe decides to try playing the ivory piece, as the mouthpiece remains in good condition. He closes his mouth and blows. No sound comes out of the instrument, but on his lips, he feels like an electric jolt that makes him immediately turn away from the instrument. The phenomenon is due to static energy, Joe thinks. So he puts the two finds back in place, closes the case, and puts it in his travel trunk. One chilly morning at the end of April 1860, Joe and the boy watch the New York skyline shrink from the stern of the ocean liner. The boy points to a small island they've just passed and remarks that a large statue would look perfect at the harbor's entrance.

3

Chapter 3 - Cork

Set 1

During the ocean crossing, Joe discovers that Tooantuh, the boy's name that Joe hasn't yet grasped to pronounce, means "Spring Frog." From the beginning, that name has been too difficult for Joe even to remember, and he has mispronounced it in a thousand ways. The boy shows Joe the reason for the name. They go up to the highest deck of the ship, which is narrower than the others and generally less frequented by passengers. The boy tells Joe to stand still. Then he takes a running start and, arriving in front of Joe, takes a prodigious leap. Arriving on top of Joe, the boy rests the hands on his shoulders and spreads the legs over his head. The boy lands back on the other side, cushioning his fall with his hands as well. Joe turns around, surprised, but the boy is already looking down from the parapet to make sure there is no one on the deck below. Suddenly, placing his hands on the parapet, he throws himself down below.

It's a jump of almost 15 feet. Joe runs to the railing to see what happened to the boy and finds him perfectly standing on the deck below, smiling and waving at him. Joe comes down and announces officially that from now on he will be called Frog for short. The newly renamed little man likes it. The voyage goes without any major hiccups, except for a terrible mouse that, for 15 days, scurries all over the first class, frightening the ladies and triggering a real hunt by the men. However, neither the gentlemen on board nor the sailors on the steamer were able to catch him during the crossing. Every day, the passengers engaged in lively discussions about the rat and placed bets on its capture, which was never achieved. The liner arrives in Cork Harbor on Friday afternoon.

Set 2

Frog's Indian heritage piques the interest and suspicion of the immigration officers. Even more interest is aroused by the artifacts they have brought with them. Explaining to the customs officers that these artifacts are not stolen antiquities for sale on the art market, but rather archaeological finds beneficial to their research—which they ambiguously label as historical—takes a considerable amount of time. When the unconvinced customs officers finally let them go, it is late at night. They are the last to disembark from the ship, together with the sailors, already a little drunk and finally off duty. The hotel carriages, usually waiting for first-class passengers to disembark, are no longer visible on the pier. It's getting late, and the port is beginning to take on a sinister aura. Around the corner, a scraggly carriage pulls up in front of them. It is

from the Bison Inn. Joe and Frog look at each other, puzzled. A Creek-born sailor with whom they had become acquainted, who incidentally had been the only one to almost catch the mouse, had told them about the Bison during the crossing. He had, in particular, praised the cuisine. But the captain, at dinner, strongly advised Joe against even approaching it because the inn stands in a neighborhood infamous for drunkenness and prostitution, and the Bison is precisely the hub of that neighborhood's depravity. The captain suggested to Joe, as well as to all the other gentlemen present, that they should rather stay at the Ambassador, the most luxurious and fashionable hotel in Cork, an accommodation that best suited the rank of the diners. Among whom, of course, was not Frog, who ate his meals in his room because he still had to practice with the fork and knife. Joe is trying to teach him so that he can take Frog with him to places where there is also a chance to be invited to eat. The bizarre coincidence of the Bison, coupled with the late hour and hunger, make them inclined to accept the ride. The two climb into the rickety carriage, which sets off through the intricate maze of narrow streets leading into the darkest part of the city. The Bison, a decrepit building overlooking a small rammed-earth square, is an inn with rooms for rent and an adjacent tavern. They arrive and find the innkeeper. After hearing that they are out-of-towners and noticing their decent attire, the innkeeper asks them if they are certain they have made the right choice, pointing out the multitude of drunks and prostitutes swarming the inn's small lobby. Indeed, the sight is not ideal, prompting Joe and Frog to seek advice. It's late; they're hungry, and none of the ruffians are paying any attention to them. Before going to sleep, they would lock themselves well inside the room, and everything would be fine. Therefore, they

agree to stay, and the innkeeper takes them to see a room on the second floor. It is filthy and old, with a rusty bed with a broken leg, while from the neighboring rooms comes a bustle of ugly mugs and half-naked prostitutes. On the floor, the scent of opium permeates the air. Joe, though accustomed to sleeping under the stars or in makeshift shelters in the outposts of the West, nevertheless tries to ask if he can have a better one, and the innkeeper tells him no and that they must make do. Frog has an intuition. How is it that an inn and a tavern, in the heart of Europe, has an American animal in its name and logo? Joe, on the steamer, explained to him that there are no bison in Europe, except for some sparse herds in Poland and Russia, but they do not resemble their American cousins. They are different in size, build, and hair density So how can that be? Frog plays his card and says in Cherokee that he is the grandson of Chief Fire Moose and that he deserves better accommodation. The innkeeper, almost changing personalities, answers in English that, now that he thinks about it, he has another vacant room upstairs. They take the stairs and arrive at a gate, which the innkeeper opens with his keys. One more flight of stairs, and they find themselves on a floor furnished with incredible luxury and sophistication: gilded stucco, mirrors, chandeliers, and carpets. The Ambassador Hotel would pale in comparison. The innkeeper shows them a room with a four-poster bed and a second feather bed, a bathroom with a marble sink and tub, and soft, clean towels. He asks if the room is to their liking. They answer yes. He leaves. Joe and Frog have no words to describe their bewilderment. After their trunk is brought to their room, prompted by the rumblings of their stomachs, they hurriedly wash, change, and descend to the ground floor. The innkeeper, at the reception desk, directs

them to go to the tavern, where they will find his wife cooking and serving them dinner. They enter the tavern and find it full of people eating loudly, drinking, and burping, while half-disclothed women shuffle from one man to another. But in one corner of the room stands a long table, already set and luxuriously laid, which no one approaches. They sit at a table for two and wait. After a short while, the innkeeper's wife shows up at their table. She offers them an Irish menu: stew with Guinness and Colcannon, a dish made with mashed potatoes and cabbage. For Joe, it's fine, but Frog, switching to Cherokee, asks the woman if she has any corn dishes, such as hominy soup or succotash. Joe doesn't understand a word the boy says, but he catches the "owi" from the woman. As Frog has taught him, "owi" means "yes" in Cherokee. The woman, noticing Joe's puzzled expression, explains in English that hominy soup is made of large, white, puffed corn kernels, and succotash is corn sautéed with beans and tomatoes. Joe orders a couple of samples of that Amerindian food too. The woman smiles and leaves. What the heck is going on here? How is it possible that, in the heart of Europe, two average Irish-looking people speak North American Indigenous languages and even cook in the Indigenous way? A few minutes later, the woman returns with their orders. Her dishes not only bear a striking resemblance to the cuisine of Frog's tribe, but they also taste the same. Even Joe is intrigued by these new flavors. When the woman comes back to ask if they're enjoying their dinner, Joe gives her a thumbs-up while Frog thanks her in Cherokee.

Set 3

As they are eating, they notice from the open tavern door facing the reception area that new customers are beginning to arrive at the inn: a disgraced priest in a frayed cassock, a foot soldier, a foundry worker, and a bricklayer. In short, a bunch of wretched people with filthy, tattered clothes. Four disheveled slatterns, likely the prostitutes preparing to serve the men in the squalid rooms on the second floor, swiftly follow them. Having escorted the last of those poor derelicts upstairs, the innkeeper throws out the remaining drunkards and their female companions from the tavern, which is already nearly empty. Then he bars the doors and windows. Only Joe and Frog remain. The two wonder what is going on now. Then, from the stairs, descend the same people who had come up earlier—but this time, they are clean, well-groomed, and dressed smartly. The sinful priest now wears a bishop's cassock; the infantryman is in a general's uniform; and the others sport tuxedos adorned with medals and knighthoods. The five ladies, dressed in elegant evening gowns, wear precious jewelry on their necks, fingers, and wrists.Arriving last in the room, apologetically, is an American whom Joe had already met on the ship and who had traveled with them in first class. He had often shared the captain's table with Joe, though Joe had never managed to figure out who he was or what he did. The American, unsurprised by the presence of Joe and the boy, greets them and takes a seat at the table. There are nine diners in total, but one extra chair remains. As they sit down, they notice a cat sleeping on the empty chair—hidden from view until now. When the last guest arrived, the cat had awakened and is now meowing, purring, and moving from lap to

lap as if it knows them all. Those five men and four women, after greeting each other and sitting down, start talking in Cherokee. They observe the somatic features of the diners. Some have blond hair and olive skin; others have very fair skin but black hair, mostly gray eyes, and often red hair. Some of them exhibit traits similar to those of Native Americans. To Joe, this does not seem possible. In his universe, whites and Indians have never crossed paths. At that table, people talk quite loudly, and in the empty room, the words echo very clearly. Frog listens and translates. One of the ladies begins to tell that at the Swedish court, which she attends regularly even though she is Danish, the customary banquet for the birthday of Prince Karol, the son of the ruler's younger brother, had taken place a few weeks ago. At this banquet, there was also the English Duke of Worchester, who had been his schoolmate at the military academy that the prince had also attended in England. The Duke, after dinner, playing cards with the ladies, told the following story. A few years ago, Prince Karol had given him a splendid snow-white warhorse—one of the most formidable steeds ever to emerge from certain renowned American stables. The Duke's imminent departure for Crimea, where he would fight alongside the French and Piedmontese against the Tsar's forces, had prompted the gift. Joe, silently, remembers the horse. Expectations were high for a cavalry officer to lose his life in a war on Russian soil, so Joe had trained it meticulously for the task. It is with great pleasure that Joe hears the horse proved invincible in battle, saving the Duke's life on multiple occasions.The princess continue. During the Battle of Balaklava, the Duke—following the furious cavalry charge that has gone down in history and a bitter saber-to-saber clash under enemy rifle fire—was one of the few to emerge alive. In the midst of the melee, as the Duke engaged in a sword

duel, his horse—aware of a Russian soldier approaching from behind to shoot its master at close range—reared up on its front legs. Then, with a powerful kick from its hind legs, it struck the soldier, killing him instantly. The Russian, however, managed to fire a volley of bullets before dying, shattering the horse's front legs. Just before the animal collapsed, the Duke succeeded in overpowering his opponent. Lying on the ground, unaware of what had just occurred, he noticed the Russians retreating. His horse, however, was mortally wounded. Though still alive, the crushing of both front legs had condemned it to death or forced suppression. The Duke, grateful to his equine companion, refused to abandon him that night and remained by his side on the battlefield until dawn. At some point, he drifted into sleep and had a strange dream. He couldn't recall the details, but one thing lingered in his memory: the sharp, resonant sound of a wind instrument playing a strange yet magical melody. He awoke with the first light and, to his astonishment, saw the horse struggling to rise. The animal succeeded—and slowly, together, they made their way back to camp. Shortly thereafter, other horses from the regiment—thought to be dead just the day before—began returning from the battlefield on their own. Within a few days, they were ready to fight again, much to the disbelief of the veterinarians and many cavalry officers. After Balaklava, the British command had estimated the horse losses to be so severe that they were on the verge of requesting evacuation from London, as the force was now virtually without cavalry. Instead, the miraculous recovery brought more than a hundred horses back into service, enabling the British to break the Russian front around Sevastopol and lay siege to the city. Sevastopol fell eleven months later, and Russia sued for peace. The Duke spoke of a miracle, but the princess, seated at the table

as the Duke recounted the story, had immediately suspected that the golden horn was behind the prodigious recovery of the horses. At this point, the innkeeper's wife returns to Joe and Frog's table, pleading with them to finish dinner quickly so the distinguished guests can be left in peace. Moments later, she brings a drink strikingly similar to the one Joe had tasted at Frog's camp. Its flavor is bitter, and its color nearly amaranth. It isn't wine, however. Frog explains that the drink is called Dikanodi Wanige—Wanige for short—also known as "dream nectar." It's traditionally prepared by the tribe's elder women to aid with sleep and dreaming. Indeed, after just a few sips, Joe and Frog begin to feel drowsy. Soon, they rise and head off to bed.

Set 4

They wake up feeling refreshed and realize it's already daylight. A church's distant bell tower strikes two chimes. It is two o'clock in the afternoon. Doing some calculations, they estimate that they have slept nearly 10 hours. Their awakening, however, is quite different from what they expected when they went to bed. They are inside the grimy room on the first floor that the innkeeper showed them the day before. Joe is lying on yellowed sheets covering a mattress smeared with dirt and lying on a limp, rusty bed, while Frog has woken up on a burlap sack stuffed with straw, serving as a makeshift mattress. Their trunk is also there, and their clothes from the night before are thrown on a chair. They get dressed quickly and go downstairs to find out what happened. They try to find the innkeeper from the day before, but at the front desk there is a big red-haired guy with a face full

of freckles. Joe asks what happened to that bald gentleman from yesterday who was giving out rooms, and the big guy says he doesn't know who he's referring to because for the past two days his father had been at the front desk. His father has hair, too. Did they need anything? The boy does not wait for an answer, and he calls his father loudly. A stocky gentleman, not bald but with red hair and freckles, appears. He bears no resemblance to the gentleman from the previous day. Then they tell him that they have been to the second floor, gone through the gate, and seen with their own eyes the luxurious rooms with velvet, marble, and gilded stucco. But the man laughs and tells them that this is impossible, and that they dreamed it all. The gate is there just to block access to the floors above because they are unusable. The roof and floors are unsafe. There would be a lot of restoration work to be done, but he and his family don't have the money to do it. Joe and Frog insist on accompanying them upstairs. The innkeeper, somewhat annoyed, accommodates them. The two are amazed that the gate is old and rusty, while they remembered it being shiny and bright. But greater astonishment seizes them when they go up to the second floor. Everywhere they look, they see rotten wood and crumbling walls. The floors are sunken, and many windows have broken glass. There are cobwebs and dust everywhere, suggesting years of neglect on the premises. Confused, they go back downstairs, and the cook, who stood in the doorway of the tavern and whom the man introduces to them as his wife, asks them what they want to eat. The woman did not look like the cook from the day before, either. Joe orders breakfast and asks the innkeeper what time the Cork stores and businesses close on Saturdays. The man's son replies that it is not Saturday but Sunday, so everything is closed. Joe and Frog look at each other in disbelief. They had slept a day and a

half, which is more than 36 hours. The innkeeper, winking at Joe, tells them that they had evidently gotten quite hungover on Friday night. After breakfast, they decide to take a walk around town. No matter what the innkeeper said, they know they had not been drinking. They remember perfectly the prairie menu dinner, the Cherokee language, the table of illustrious patrons, and the room on the second floor.

Set 5

Since it's a Sunday and there's not much to do in Cork, they're unsure of where to begin. It would have been more appropriate to begin with those individuals who were present at the Bison dinner and were familiar with the horn. Yeah, but how to find them? Since it is a cold but sunny day, a rare occurrence in Ireland, Joe and Frog opt for a visit to Blackrock Castle, whose silouhette is iconic of the city. In the interim, they will gather some inspiration. They leave the harbor with its houses piled on top of each other and slowly enter more residential neighborhoods. Then the houses thin out further, making way for villas and cottages with all-around gardens and even parks. As they stand flanking the garden wall of a mansion, only the top floor visible from the street, a squirrel swiftly snatches Joe's hat, darts into the garden, and ascends a tree, clutching the hat in its mouth. Joe sees the animal high in a tree near the fence; therefore, he decides to climb over it to go get the hat back. With a modest leap and Frog's help, Joe finds himself standing on the brick fence wall. The mansion is beautiful, and the garden is well-maintained, but he does not see a soul. With a whistle, Joe calls to Frog and invites him to climb up the wall

to give him a hand on his way out, and Frog, with a nimble leap, scales the wall in no time. They descend into the garden with the squirrel still standing in the tree, making mocking sounds at Joe, who is looking for a pinecone or stick to pull it down. He finds a stone and is about to throw it when a woman's voice suggests he should not. Joe turns around, not understanding where the voice is coming from. A woman, clad in a gardening dress and sporting a straw hat on her head, emerges from a bush that shields her. The woman is wearing broad gloves and carrying a basket with flowers. Joe asks who the woman is, and she replies that she is the landlady. Joe apologizes, explaining to her about the squirrel's mishap and promising that they would leave immediately. But the woman replies that there is no hurry. In fact, she was waiting for them. The woman takes off her hat and lets her long red hair flow. Joe and Frog recognize her as one of the four women sitting at Bison's luxury table. They ask her if it is true that she was at the inn on Friday night. The woman nods and invites them in for tea, so she can explain everything to them. At that moment, the squirrel from above lets go of the hat, which falls at Joe's feet. The squirrel then disappears into the branches. Being so close to her, Joe suddenly recognizes her as the celebrity she is. The woman is Jane Auwory, a celebrated Irish writer whose fame went beyond the borders of Ireland. A few years earlier, she had made a literary-themed lecture tour of the United States, visiting those cities that, with the famine of '48, had absorbed the most migratory flow from the island. Joe's father and other congressmen of Irish origin had invited her as a guest of honor to a banquet in Washington. It was on that occasion that Joe met her. Numerous powerful individuals escorted her, treating her as if she were a head of state. Why was she at the Bison?

Why does she speak Cherokee? What was that dinner? Over tea and pastries served by a waitress in a parlor, Auwory starts from the beginning. The Germans and Celts, while claiming similar mythological origins, had always been at war with each other. Especially in the British Isles. But with Christianity spreading across Northern Europe and peoples looking more towards trade than robbery, it turned out that, near the year 1000 AD, the two peoples merged. They shared, above all, the mystical and religious aspects. The gods and heroes of their pantheon were the same, and both were people devoted to the worship of Nature and Heaven. The Celts introduced the Druids to the Germans, a priestly caste dedicated to caring for and managing natural forces. The Germans had no dedicated priests, and some of them immediately embraced the idea of becoming Druids. On the other hand, the Celts had no writing and therefore adopted the runic writing of the Germans. Around AD 1200, the Vikings, a Germanic tribe occupying the northern lands and great navigators, arrived and settled in America, beginning to colonize it and making friends with the natives. Trade and knowledge exchange followed. The Vikings also learned to communicate in the language of the Indians. But not all of them. The Viking military elites did not want to mix with the Indians. Only druids and shamans, who came into contact and discovered the common nature of their beliefs, formed strong friendships that led them to marry each other or to have their children marry each other. The descendants of those early European druids and Indian shamans who crossed over, as well as those who came later and even those of today, have always lived in North America or Europe. Thanks to European colonization of the various continents, they now live scattered across the four corners of the globe. They have taken to calling

themselves 'Vikindians'. For communication, they use the Cherokee language, passed down from generation to generation, replacing Viking, Gaelic, or other ancient European idioms with today's national languages. However, some of them still possess the ability to read and understand runes. The Vikindians divide into 10 large tribes: Ireland, England, Scandinavia, Russia and the Baltic countries, German-speaking peoples, France, Italy, the western Mediterranean, Turkey and Greece, and America, of course. Each tribe has a chief, and she, Jane, is the chief of the Irish tribe. The dinner at the Bison was the plenum of the tribal chiefs. Such kind of meetingsare a rare event, and it is even rarer for all of them to be there. Due to their prominence in their daily lives, the chiefs must travel covertly or create plausible excuses for their absences. They hold every meeting in the utmost secrecy and in the most unlikely locations. The Bison, in Cork, is one of those places. This time, the occasion for the meeting was one of extreme gravity and urgency. Princess Louise Juliana of Hesse-Kassel, chieftain of the Vikindian tribe of Scandinavia and sister of Georgios I of Greece, had fresh news of the horn to communicate to all of them in order to decide the next move in the attempt to recover it. The plan devised that night provides that Joe and Frog must visit the Duke's horse to confirm its miraculous and sudden recovery. If the healing is genuine, then Joe and Frog will have to pursue the investigative path opened by that episode. But if Joe discovers that the horse's story is merely the fictional tale of a military man trying to impress the ladies, then the search for the horn will have to begin elsewhere. As they consume the tea and pastries, the woman concludes her narrative. It is already dark outside, and Joe and Frog have to return to the hotel for dinner. The maid, who had served them all afternoon, enters the tea room and

tells the lady that the carriage has returned. Jane announces a change of plans. She has already sent two of her butlers to the Bison, who have refitted the trunk and loaded it onto the returning carriage. From tonight on, Joe and Frog will sleep at the Ambassador. Her coachman would take them to their destination. They are just about to board the carriage when the woman suggests they go to the Monastery of Saint Olcan the next day. They must talk to Father Brendon, the monastery's abbot. It will not be easy to get past the monks' filter, but if they manage to make themselves known, Father Brendon will provide them with useful information about the horn. The carriage departs and exits the road through a beautiful, shiny brass gate.

Set 6

Early the next morning, Joe and Frog climb up to the monastery that dominates, from the top of a hillock, the port, the old town, and the entire bay. When they arrive at the hermitage, the two ask the guardian friar to let them in and give them a chance to talk to the abbot. The friar tells them to wait, and he makes them sit on a bench at the entrance of the building in front of an aviary full of pigeons. 'I wonder how they cook them here in Europe,' thinks Joe. A young friar with glasses and a thick beard comes down, introducing himself as Brother Marlowe, the abbot's secretary and personal assistant. Joe asks to speak to the superior, but the friar immediately gives him a thousand hindrances, saying that the abbot is busy, that he will say mass soon, that he is at prayer, and that he has no time for pilgrims. If they want to go to confession, there is a father in the church ready in the confessional; if they want

to leave an offering, there is the friar-treasurer just down the hall. Joe then takes out the painted bison and hands it to the friar, telling him to show that painting to the abbot. Marlowe betrays a certain astonishment for a moment but does not flinch. He remains unfazed, even when Joe reveals his surname. He takes his leave, promising to do what he can. After half an hour, the young friar returns, telling Joe and Frog that the abbot is waiting in his office and to follow him. As soon as the two see the abbot, an old man in his late sixties, they dismiss the hypothesis that he too was present at the Bison's dinner. The clergyman walks up to them, embraces Joe in a familiar way, and asks Frog about his tribe. Faced with their initial embarrassment, the cleric introduces himself as Father Brendon McAllan, a distant cousin of Joe's father, but with whom he has always had an intense correspondence relationship. The senator has even warned him of Joe's arrival and Frog's story. The abbot asks them, pleonastically, if it is the horn they are looking for. Well, that monastery is the very place where the horn was originally kept. It's halfway between Europe and America, and the monks always kept the horn well guarded. It was therefore the safest place to keep that magical instrument, at least until the French Revolution broke out. The priest asks them to follow him to the library, which is also accessible from the superior's office. Brother Marlowe stands before them in silence. IIn the library, the abbot asks the friar-librarian to bring him something, and he returns with an ancient book, which he places on a lectern. Father Brendon opens it and reveals that it is a very precious illuminated codex written in Gaelic. The abbot bids Marlowe to come closer to the manuscript and assist in turning its pages. The codex is so jealously preserved that for centuries, by rule, only the head of the monastery can consult

it. It is a historiated chronicle dating from around the year 1300 and is, in fact, a saga written by Mael McAllan, the second abbot of the monastery and the youngest of Allan's sons, who was also present with his brothers when Cathbad was imprisoned. It tells the story of Allan, leader of the noble Druids and warrior, who defeats Cathbad, a rebel and evil Druid who has transformed himself into an enormous bison of white gold to subjugate and destroy the human race. According to the story, Cathbad, in his metamorphosis, brought four other druids with him, including his chosen successor, Kellan. Taranis had transformed into a gigantic bird, Lugus into an anthropomorphic ape, Artair into a dragon, and Kellan into a killer whale.They were all crafted from the same metal: white gold. It was not exactly gold, but a ductile but indestructible metallic material, as fine and shiny as gold, but which melted at temperatures unattainable on the planet. The manuscript's author refers to that material as catbandonium. The five metal monsters emerged from the lava of an ancient volcano in the Aegean Sea thanks to the power of the dark forces of Nature previously summoned by Cathbad and his men using a flute made of iron that does not rust, its meteoritic origin protecting it from decay. Joe then tells the abbot that his father in Washington has given him an artifact: a flute butt fished out of the Aegean. It is made of very strange iron, free of rust, and bears an embedded ouroboros. The abbot remarks that only Cathbad ever owned such a flute, and no one made another after him. So, it could be that one. The abbot proceeds. Once out, whether by land, sea, or air, the monsters directed themselves against the Viking and Celtic communities, as well as towards America. Joe interrupts the abbot and asks for further confirmation. Does a European manuscript from the Middle Ages really mention America?

Undoubtedly, he hears himself answer, even though the names of the lands described are different. The illustrations, then, leave no room for doubt. One of them shows a golden bison destroying a Native American camp on the Great Plains. The accuracy of the landscape depiction and the details about the people are stunning. The illuminator could not have painted that scene if he had not seen it with his own eyes. The abbot moves on. The ape headed for the Scandinavian Peninsula, the dragon for the British Isles, the condor attacked the river valleys of central Europe, and the orca turned against the Gauls inhabiting Anatolia. They brought death and destruction wherever they went. So Allan gathered all the European druids and American shamans and took them to a large island in the north. What we today call Greenland. Allan carried his very own ivory flute, made from a walrus tooth. That was the only ivory that the Nordic peoples once had available. With the flute, Allan summoned and connected to the Forces of Heaven, which transmitted to him and to all a holy melody useful to defeat and bring under control the dark Forces of Nature that had manifested themselves in those monsters. The Forces of Heaven are more powerful than those of Nature and are even dominant over the dark ones. The abbot is interrupted by Joe. The shamaness that guards the golden bison has spoken of a 'Great Spirit.' The abbot replies that these are just different definitions of the same force. The South American Indians call it 'Pachamama,' the powerful Mother Goddess, and the Europeans, once Christianized, have come to call it 'Holy Family,' meaning God the Father and the Virgin Mary. But we always speak of the union of astral and natural forces. Allan immediately learned the melody by ear and took to playing it on his flute. Those present, including both Europeans and Indians, felt a surge

of immense vigor that quickly led them to gain health and a heightened awareness of the world and the universe. And each of them discovered that they had developed their own very personal power. The melody and their new powers would have enabled the druids and shamans, or, rather, the druid-shamans, to defeat Cathbad and the others. Joe tells the abbot that he may also have a piece of that flute. The abbot inquires whether this second artifact contains an ouroboros as well. Joe replies in the affirmative. The friar then confirms that the two flute pieces his father gave him could indeed be the originals. Joe adds that the ivory piece was unearthed in America. This fact could further confirm that the flute piece may indeed have belonged to Allan. Once again, only Allan could have possessed such a flute, and no one else ever produced a similar one after him. By the way, Allan and the others, having returned south, began to fight the monsters, starting with Cathbad, the bison, who was the fiercest and most systematic of the five, and from whom the other four took their power. They found him roaming the east coast of the United States, ravaging the territories of the Indian nations living there. Druids and shamans, after immense struggle, succeeded in driving him west. However, the bison was difficult to contain. During one of the hunts to lead him towards the Rocky Mountains, at Lake Erie, the bison attacked Allan, who, while riding, was playing the sacred melody with the flute to flog it. Allan found himself on the ground and tried to defend himself by delivering a blow with the instrument, breaking it in half. One half landed—who knows where—and the other half shattered into a thousand pieces. With this blow, however, Allan had managed to divert the animal's charge. The bison, seeing him in trouble, charged him a second time. However, this time, Allan remained unfazed and pulled out his sickle. With a

masterstroke and a portentous leap, he was able, in a cloud of sparks, to cut off one of the animal's horns. Despite this nasty blow, the Golden Bison succeeded in escaping and running away. The following day, they found him again, and this time, they succeeded in taking him to the area of an ancient volcano whose lava bubbled underground. Even without the flute, they joined forces and accomplished to open the volcano's caldera beneath the animal's feet, and the monster disappeared into the lava. One by one, the Druids—thanks to their individual and joint powers combined with the power of the horn—rendered the four beasts harmless. After being chased across the ocean, the dragon found itself imprisoned under a volcano in Argentina. The orca was buried in the volcano that is now the island of Santorini. The condor ended up trapped inside Mount Etna, and the gorilla was jailed beneath the lava fields of Iceland. But they knew their victory was only temporary. The lava prisons would not resist the monsters' power for long. They needed something to seal them off. What they were looking for was a continuous magical vibration maintained regularly over the heads of the beasts. The lava was the jail, but the bars of the prison were—and still are—vibrational in nature, and the vibrations must remain tuned at all times. If they lose their frequency, they lose their containment power. But to keep the prisons of Cathbad and his companions in constant resonance, Allan's flute would have been needed—yet it had been destroyed and lost. Another could have been made by asking the Inuit for more walrus ivory or whale bone, but it wouldn't have been the same. The old flute was imbued with the psychic and melodic energies of all those who, for centuries before Allan, had played it in druidic ceremonies. The new instrument would have been far less powerful than its predecessor and thus of little use to their purpose. Someone then

proposed melting down the cathbandonium horn and shaping a new flute from it, but every attempt—whether in Europe or America—ended in failure. The finest European blacksmiths and the most skilled Indian metallurgists couldn't even scratch it. That block of metal was impossible to work. It was Allan who had the idea to try immersing the horn in the acidic waters of Yellowstone. Those poisonous waters, which can dissolve a human body in minutes, might perhaps soften the incredibly hard metal. Allan was right. After many months submerged in the volcanic waters, the horn became malleable, and with great effort, they managed to shape it into a wind instrument. It wasn't exactly a flute, but being made of that extraordinary material—born of natural magic—the instrument could produce effects similar to those of the original model. What they didn't expect, however, was what would happen the first time it was played. At the first notes of the holy melody, the horn produced an exceptional sound that instantly made everyone feel uplifted; trees began to grow, animals flocked in great numbers, and both people and nature seemed to regain their vitality. In that moment, Allan understood that the key to keeping the prisoners locked away was connected to the place where they were confined. Surrounding the five volcanoes was a unique habitat in which certain animal species thrived more than others. These particular creatures would become their guardians. The vibrations generated by their cries, the patter of their footsteps, and the sheer abundance and health of their kind would prevent the monsters from breaking free—keeping the bars of their underground cages in perfect resonance. The abbot asks if there are any questions. Joe is curious: why was a sickle mentioned in reference to Allan? Father Brendon explains that certain druids, like Allan, used a golden sickle to gather sacred

plants. However, they also employed it for self-defense. Brother Marlowe continues turning the pages of the illuminated codex until he reaches a section written in letters unfamiliar to Joe. The abbot asks him to stop there. The strange signs on the pages are runes—ancient characters of the Nordic alphabet. Here, they serve as descriptions of musical chords, and one of these musical transcriptions is the holy melody itself. He who has the horn and can read the text can play this powerful melody to spread the Good. But if played backwards, it can have deleterious effects on one's surroundings and open up malignant magical contexts. Fortunately, few people are able to read those runes due to the difficulty of the text itself; despite being written in Celtic characters, the manuscript is actually written in the Cherokee language. The abbot closes the tome and asks Brother Marlowe to return it to the librarian. Then they all proceed to the monastery church, where, behind the altar and within a crypt, the abbot reveals an old shrine of distinctly Celtic craftsmanship. He opens it and reveals that it is empty. This was the place where the horn had originally been kept, and it would still be there had it not been stolen in the late 1700s—1798, to be exact, during the Irish Rebellion. The rebels, seeking independence from England, had gathered in Cork, where the Revolutionary Directory in Paris dispatched a contingent of French soldiers to aid their fight for freedom. After initial successes, the insurgents were ultimately overwhelmed by English repression, leading to the final routing of both the rebels and the French through the streets of Cork. The surviving French and a handful of Irish rebels took refuge in the monastery, which was then placed under siege by British forces. The British surrounded the monastery, and after several days of resistance, the besieged surrendered and opened the gates. The British army guaranteed the lives of the Irish on

the condition that they emigrate to America, and permitted the French to re-embark and return home. When peace returned and the occupiers had departed, the monks discovered that the horn was missing. If Joe is still questioning why he was chosen to search for it, he must understand that it is the duty of a McAllan to recover the horn. Because it was Allan himself who founded the monastery to keep the horn securely locked away, and the McAllans have passed down the title of abbot of that monastery through generations—a role that binds the entire family to the guardianship of both the horn and the manuscript. The horn was stolen from a McAllan, and it will be a McAllan who retrieves it. Brendon is too old to undertake such a perilous and demanding quest. Therefore, the chiefs, among the other McAllans, have chosen Joe to fulfill this task. In rhe end, the patronymic McAllan, in Celtic, means 'Sons of Allan'. Now it all makes a lot of sense to Joe. He would like to know more, but the church bells start to ring. It's noon, and it is time for the Angelus. Brother Marlowe, who had left earlier, approaches his superior to accompany him to the dressing room. Father Brendon takes his leave, inviting them to go to Middleton in the afternoon to visit the other McAllans. They would recount the story of their shared lineage and provide Joe and Frog with a detailed explanation of the interactions between American Indians and Europeans, drawing on their expertise in Celtic antiquities. The abbot would later send a message to Middleton announcing their arrival. Joe considers asking for the buffalo painting back, but the abbot is already surrounded by several monks, who hand him the holy garments and gently usher him toward the sacristy as they begin chanting a psalm.

Set 7

Joe and Frog return to the hotel, and after lunch, they rent two horses from the hotel stable to join Middleton. Both he and the boy return to riding after a long time. They are so happy to be back on horseback that they engage in a liberating gallop, covering the 25 kilometers in just under an hour. Having entered the town, they are not sure who to ask about the McAllans. Perhaps they should speak with the town's parish priest, citing the abbot as a reference. The main square, lined with narrow streets and alleys, centers around the parish church. The two tie their horses to a corner of the square and hand them over to a red-haired but grey-eyed boy in exchange for a pound. They are on their way to the church when a pig escapes from a butcher's shop and cuts the square and the road to the two. The butcher shouts to stop it, and Joe and Frog set off in pursuit. They are almost on the verge of catching him when the pig scrambles into an alley around a corner. Joe and Frog turn the corner, but the pig has disappeared. A somewhat decrepit and weathered sign, emblazoned above the entrance of a small shop, reads '*Erick McAllan Antiquities: From the Old to the New World*'. There is no need to bother the parish priest. They have found who they are looking for. They push the door of the shop and enter. There is a girl inside, clearly Irish, but with very long, raven-black hair. Joe, without introducing himself, asks to speak to Mr. Erick McAllan, but the girl replies that, unfortunately, Mr. Erick has long since passed away. The shop sign is old and has never been changed. She is Mr. McAllan's granddaughter. Birgid, to serve them. Frog points Joe to a shelf on which, among many other objects, stands one of those Indian pipes that Joe also

smoked from when he was at camp. Almost nonchalantly, the girl reveals that a traveler returning from the United States had sold it to her grandfather for very little money. Joe then asks the girl how much she thinks two ancient flute butts with Celtic decorations would be worth. Birgid sighs and tells him that they are worth little if they are not intact, but she could still give him a good price. Joe then inquires whether any of these pieces would gain value if discovered in America. The girl is dismayed for a moment, not knowing what to answer, and it is then that Joe reveals his surname and the reason for his visit. Birgid regains her smile but quickly becomes suspicious. She walks to the door, lets out a whistle, and the horseboy arrives. The two confabulate for a while, then the boy leaves. Birgid closes the shop's shutter and bolts the door. Without saying a word, she signals for both of them to remain silent and follow her. The girl slides a shelf onto a camouflaged rail on the floor, and behind it, a door opens with steps leading underground. Birgid lights a lamp, and together they descend into what appears to be a dungeon. They arrive in a vast room, but the lamp can only dimly illuminate it due to its immense size.Birgid lights a series of lamps, revealing to Joe and Frog that they are in a long, narrow room lined with towering shelves crammed with files and documents. The lamps illuminate only a small section of the shelving—just a fragment of the vast furniture that stretches deep into the shadowy recesses beyond.The woman introduces herself as a distant cousin of Joe's, explaining that Uncle Brandon had warned her in advance about their upcoming visit.Fortunately, at this hour, all the fishermen are asleep and the rest of the villagers are out working in the fields. so only the little boy and the butcher saw them coming in town and entering her shop. Patrick is Birgid's little brother, and Mr.

Elvrin is a family friend. Both were waiting for their arrival, so no information could leak about their presence there. Joe inquires about the reason for the heightened secrecy and the nature of the room. Birgid replies that many people would like to put their hands on what is stored in there. And their intentions are not that good. As they have probably already intuited, the shop and the antiquities business are just a front. The real work she, and before her, the ancestors of her branch of the family, do is to keep the registry of the Vikindian tribes tidy and up to date. She documents the births, marriages, and deaths of the families descended from the Norse druids and Indian shamans who defeated Cathbad—people with Amerindian and Viking-Celtic blood. In other words, Birgid is the Vikindian people's chief archivist. Here, she keeps track of who all the members of the various tribes are, where they live, and whom they marry. She tries to take care of them and help them in times of need. Joe asks what kind of need she is referring to. Birgid replies that, for the last forty years or so, there have been some Vikindians who disappear and never return. Families gradually report them missing, but all attempts to find them have failed. She is coordinating the investigation into each of them, but despite deploying considerable forces across five continents, every effort to solve the mystery has failed. Birgid changes the topic and tells Joe she has something she wants to show him. Birgid then climbs a long ladder and takes out a folder from a shelf. She descends, places it on a large table, and opens it. Both the back and the cover bear the name McAllan. Birgid shuffles through the papers, some looking quite old, and pulls out Joe's file. In disbelief, Joe takes it in his hand. He doesn't understand. What does it all mean?Birgid explains that the McAllans are an ancient

family of Celtic origin who later merged with the Scandinavian conquerors and were among the first to shuttle between the Old and New Worlds. They were also among the first to adopt Indian spouses. The number of McAllan men and women who have married Indians throughout their history is innumerable. For example, she and Patrick are the children of a McAllan and a Cherokee woman. Her grandfather, Erick, was married to the daughter of a Snakes chief. As for Joe's family branch, his paternal great-grandmother—the mother of Everard—was a Shoshone Indian. Birgid shows him the registry documents of his father and aunt Johanna. Joe now understands the reasons behind his aunt's escape among the Native Americans, as well as their acceptance of her as one of their own. Now it's clear why his father, in addition to his aunt, is deeply worried about the white people's westward progress. Not only that. Joe, as Birgid shows him, discovers something extraordinary: not only his father, Fergus, but also his mother, Caroline, is Vikindian. So both he and his brother are. Suddenly, a long whistle echoes from a distance. Birgid stops talking and listens. It is Patrick's signal that he is coming. After a short while, a light can be seen coming out of the darkness, getting bigger and bigger until it shows the boy running at breakneck speed and reaching the three of them in a daze. A trusted courier delivered an urgent message from Father Brandon, requesting that Joe and Frog return to Cork and go to him immediately. Birgid wishes Joe and Frog good luck, as they intend to leave the way they came in. However, Birgid informs them that they will take another exit. Patrick will be the one to lead them to their horses, as they are no longer in the village. In fact, specially appointed officials constantly bring updates from each Vikindian tribe to the registry office. The comings and goings of foreigners would

be noticed in Middleton, so the registry has a back exit that, after a long tunnel, comes out into the open countryside in a wooded area on the grounds of a farm belonging to a Vikindian family. The butcher's family. Before letting them go, Birgid says she has something else to show them. With another binder in hand, she pulls out a document: President Lincoln's registry card.

Set 8

Arriving in Cork at dusk, the two rush into the monastery, which seems to be in great turmoil. Father Brandon is waiting for them in the lobby, in despair. Brother Marlowe is nowhere to be found—nor is the illuminated chronicle. He must have guessed long before that the too-good-to-be-true Londoner was hiding something. Marlowe arrived a year ago, claiming to be an outcast Catholic in the Protestant capital of the Anglican Empire, so the monastic community welcomed him warmly. The man was studious, cultured, intelligent, and had soon distinguished himself from his fellow monks—so much so that Brandon had taken him on trial as his personal secretary for a few months. During these months, Marlowe had been dutiful, reliable, and efficient, never giving rise to doubts or suspicions. And instead... But let's cut to the chase. There is not a minute to lose. They must retrieve that code at all costs. According to some witnesses, Marlowe, in civilian clothes and with a freshly shaven beard, took the steamer to London in the mid-afternoon. By this time, there are no more ships departing, but the next day there is one—the first—leaving at 6 a.m. Tomorrow, they both have to be on that ship. As they leave the monastery, the bells announce the time of vespers, and the friars swarm into the church. Riding

down the hill from the monastery, Joe comments to Frog that the disappearance of the manuscript is not an irreparable damage. Even if the code were destroyed, someone can still play those tunes; otherwise, there would be no explanation for the Duke of Worchester's story. Joe and Frog return to the hotel, but, in their room, a bitter discovery awaits them. Someone has spilled their luggage on the floor and raked through it. Nothing is missing, excluding the two artifacts. Marlowe, knowing that they were in Middleton in the afternoon, probably dropped by the hotel for a not-so-friendly visit. Why did Marlowe steal the manuscript and the flutes? What's that fake monk planning to do with them? Sell them? Joe, resentful, asks Frog to make one last effort before dinner: they should go back to Mrs. Auwory's mansion. She can give them some insight into Marlowe's motives for committing the two crimes, and perhaps even where he fled to. Frog agrees. They rent two horses again at the hotel reception and ride to the villa. When they arrive, they find the main gate locked and corroded with rust. The shutters and doors of the building are nailed shut. Even the garden, which had looked so well cared for the day before, is now in a state of neglect. Yet both he and Frog had seen the garden, had entered the house, and remembered coming out through that gate, which had gleamed from how shiny it was. The gate, open and well-oiled yesterday, now stands closed with a rusty bolt that appears to have remained untouched for years. A passing carter stops and asks if they're looking for someone or something. Joe asks him about Mrs. Auwory, explaining that he spoke to her the day before and stayed at the villa—so he doesn't understand why the property is now empty and in such a state. The carter inquires whether Joe might have visited the Bison, an alcohol, sex, and opium den near the harbor. Joe, ingenuously, replies that yes, he was at the

Bison a couple of nights ago. The man, sighing with patience, says that if Joe knows the Bison, then clearly he's had one opium pipe too many. Indeed, the Auwory family owns that villa, but it has remained closed and unoccupied for decades. Moreover, everyone knows that Mrs. Jane Auwory, the famous writer, lives in Paris and hasn't set foot in Cork for years.

4

Chapter 4 - The Mediterranean and beyond

Set 1

At sundown, Kellan regains consciousness on a solitary beach that looks like a Santorini one. He had been imprisoned for centuries within the heart of the volcano that dominates the archipelago, his body fused into a mass of molten metal. Then, something shifted. The volcano expelled him in a violent eruption, hurling him onto the sand as a blazing sphere of liquefied alloy. Beneath the cool sea breeze, his form begins to solidify, reverting to the human shape once held by the druid. He looks down at himself. It is his own body. Yet he feels that his skin, muscles, and blood are anything but flesh and biological matter. It's as if he were composed of a substance somewhere between stone and metal. With a rock, he scratches his arm, and instead of blood, a bluish liquid squirts out. If his new anatomy were analyzed by a futuristic scientist, they

would conclude that the skin, muscles, and organs of Cathbad's designated successor consist of silicon, bound together by a hydrogen-based bloodstream. Kellan mirrors himself in a still pool nearby. From the outside, he appears fully human. His skin bears a brownish metallic sheen, yet nothing so unusual as to distinguish him from a deeply tanned Mediterranean man. The only clues betraying his mutated body are its lukewarm temperature and the faintly mineral sensation of his touch. He is completely naked and needs to find clothing. At one edge of the beach, a deserted fishermen's workshop stands weathered and silent. On its terrace, a few workers' garments hang out to dry—sun-bleached, salt-stiff, and anonymous. The kind of clothing that blends into the background, unnoticed. Just what he needs. Once dressed, no one will give him a second glance when he reaches the first village. Kellan climbs a narrow path winding through the rocks that enclose the beach. At the top of the cliff, he pauses and looks down. The view confirms it: this is Kamari Beach. He is certain now—he has landed in Santorini. He's on the eastern side of the island. Fira, the main town, is over five miles away. He'll have to walk. When he reaches the town, he finds all the people outside their houses, all intent on watching the volcano erupt lava. But, as Kellan realizes, the worst of the eruption is over. Looking around, it seems that there have been no casualties and no damage to buildings. Yet people have worried expressions, and they talk with a scared tone. They are clearly not concerned about the lava or pyroclastic material fallout. Slowly, Kellan begins to remember all the details of the events that led up to his transformation into a golden orca and his imprisonment by that bastard, half-blooded, and degenerate Allan's accomplices in his nefarious heresy. It's evident what people are afraid of:

him. Kellan establishes that it is a different era from the one he lived in. The clothes people wear and the workmanship of the ships are not quite those of his time. However, it is primarily through the language that Kellan realizes several centuries have passed since he was still human. People speak a mixture of Greek and Turkish. Why? The Turks controlled only a small portion of Anatolia at the time, certainly not the Greek islands. Kellan, who was born and raised in Galatia in central Anatolia, speaks both languages fluently. Galatia was the region named after the Galatians, a Celtic tribe to which he and his family also belonged. That is why Kellan also knows Gaelic, but it does not seem that this language is of much use to him at the moment. He tries to ask for some information to start a conversation and test his linguistic understanding of these evolved languages. He especially wants to see whether the archaic versions of Greek and Turkish are still understandable today. And yes, Greeks and Turks understand him, even though they're surprised that his Greek and Turkish sound so old-fashioned. But as soon as they make remarks about his way of speaking, Kellan walks away before answering. He would be at a loss for words, and his ignorance of the modern world could lead him to betray himself. Before retiring in solitude to think, Kellan asks what day it is and what year it is. Someone replies, stating that it is the year 1761 in the Christian calendar. If he understood correctly, that means he has been a prisoner in the volcano for at least 500 years. His new body does not feel the need to eat, so Kellan seeks a quiet area where he can find out if this new form of himself has any powers of his own. He wonders, too, if he retains any powers from his former shape. He discovers a lava rock quarry that is quiet enough for him to stay undisturbed all night. With great concentration and after many attempts, he finally manages to

dissolve himself into a cloud of dust and reappear farther—but not too far—from where he had dematerialized. This new power allows him to create a space-time bubble around himself and, with a blinding flash, transport himself elsewhere in time and space. But only within a limited range. In fact, he reappears within seconds, quite close to where he was before. He can't travel this way across the world, but it could come in handy. He can also turn stone into metal. In his hands, ordinary pebbles become nuggets of gold, silver, or whatever metal he chooses. The smaller stones in his fist transform into gems and precious stones. With a little more concentration and time, he produces from a larger-than-usual lava stone a diamond the size of a grapefruit. But mostly, Kellan discovers that he can control the elements: make the wind rise, rain fall, lightning strike, and fog appear. Even fire responds to his nod. To the islanders, the weather that night on Santorini seems to have gone mad. They attribute the bizarre conditions to the volcano's eruption. First it thunders, then it rains, then it hails, and finally strong gusts of wind sweep through—all within half an hour. Then the cycle begins again, growing more intense, until dawn, when the sky returns to normal.

Set 2

In the morning, Kellan arrives at the harbor and steps into a tailor's shop to commission an express suit. He pays upfront, using the gold nuggets he had transmuted in the quarry. He waits in the shop until the garment is ready, and as soon as the tailor finishes sewing, he puts it on without delay. Now respectably dressed, he orders a full travel wardrobe and, in the

meantime, haggles with three fishermen for passage to Nisyros. On the boat, the fishermen attempt to rob the presentable gentleman. One of them tries to stab him in the back with a knife, but Kellan immediately notices and, with a flash, dissolves and reappears on the other side of the boat. The three men, strongly superstitious, remain petrified, as if facing a demon. From his new standpoint, Kellan causes the sea and wind to rise, leaving the fishermen even more paralyzed with terror. Subsequently, lightning strikes the man wielding the knife, propelling him overboard. While he is still flying through the air, before he hits the water, a killer whale comes out of high waves and swallows him whole. Kellan is pleased with what he sees. The Aegean orcas, who had allied themselves with him when he had taken fish form, had passed on to their descendants their loyalty to their former master: the cathbandonian orca. Indeed, the orcas escort the boat, menacingly displaying their dorsal fins and occasionally coming out of the water with aggressive leaps. The surviving fishermen, prostrate on their knees, beg him not to kill them. However, Kellan is so angry he wants to unleash carnage. He grabs an oar from the boat, snaps it, and transforms the butt into an electrified obsidian sword, as the orcas whirl around the vessel, baring their array of sharp teeth. Kellan approaches the increasingly frightened men and grabs the first fisherman within reach by the arm. The contact between Kellan's hand and the man's skin unleashes a small electrical storm, leaving behind a tattoo in the shape of an ouroboros with three snakes. The tattoo begins to pulsate. The snakes, as if alive, start to coil inward. Kellan is at first astonished by what has happened, but soon forms a concrete hypothesis about what may have just occurred: the tattoo is a sign that the man is under his power. The druid decides to put his intuition to

the test. He hands the tattooed sailor the sword and orders him to kill his companion. The sailor mercilessly slits the mate's throat.Satisfied, Kellan has the slain sailor's body thrown overboard. Immediately, the killer whales pounce, tearing it apart in a trail of blood. Then, with calm detachment, Kellan examines the tattoo on the remaining sailor's arm. Formed of pure silicon, the mark rests slightly above the skin. What an unexpected power. This one could prove very useful in realizing his plans for revenge. The surviving fisherman, like an automaton, carries out Kellan's every command and brings him to his destination. Intrigued, Kellan begins experimenting with the tattoo's potential, subjecting the man to a series of tests. He discovers that the mark not only enforces loyalty and obedience, but also grants him increasing control the closer he is to the tattooed individual—shaping their behavior and even their speech to his will. Yet despite being directed in word and action, the tattooed appear natural and spontaneous. More remarkably, the tattoo obscures any recollection of Kellan when questioned. When asked by the islanders about his passenger, the fisherman either evades the question or fabricates a lie. Even under torture, those marked would be unable to reveal anything about Kellan. And there is more. If Kellan concentrates on a tattooed subject, no matter where they are, he can sense their presence and pinpoint their location with precision. But exploring the reach of his new powers is not the main reason Kellan has come to Nisyros. He wants to discover what happened to the island's Druidic community, once prosperous and flourishing in his day. The inhabitants, impressed by the gentleman's old-fashioned speech, explain that the Celts and Druids abandoned the place many centuries ago. Now the island is part of the Ottoman Empire, inhabited almost exclusively by Greeks, gathered in

a small fishing village. Kellan asks what became of the Greek empire of Byzantium, which once held sovereignty over the Aegean. The locals look at him as a fool out of time and explain that the Eastern Roman Empire ceased to exist in the mid-1400s, after the Ottomans conquered Constantinople and overthrew the last emperor. However, they add that between the fall of Byzantium and the rise of Ottoman rule, the island had been under the control of the Venetian Republic for at least a century. Kellan sets himself the goal of learning the history of the last 500 years as quickly as possible. He can't afford to cut a poor figure when speaking to people. They might recognize him. Kellan visits the volcano, once the heart of the druidic village—alive with forges, warehouses, and residential cabins, including his own and Cathbad's. To his great disappointment, only the foundations of the settlement remain. Cathbad's flute, in short, has long been lost. Kellan reproaches himself for having hoped to find even a fragment of that magical instrument. He needs it. The sacred melody of their druidic order, known only to Cathbad, has not vanished entirely. Fortunately, Kellan possesses absolute pitch, and his prodigious memory allows him to recall every melody he's heard—even those he's never played. He remembers every note of his master's music. That melody is the key to setting in motion the mechanism that could free Cathbad and the others, and finally complete the task Allan had once prevented them from fulfilling.Kellan and the tattooed fisherman return to Santorini. Kellan disembarks first. The man, uncertain, asks what he should do now. "Nothing more. I don't know what to do with you. Besides, you've seen far too much." Kellan instructs him to take the boat and sail far from the coast. As the vessel begins to push off, Kellan raises his hand and blasts it into a massive fireball.

Set 3

Kellan, now disguised as an old-fashioned gentleman, buys a traveling trunk from a junk dealer and then visits the tailor to collect the wardrobe he had ordered. He instructs the tailor to pack the clothes into the trunk and informs him that he will retrieve them the following day. He trades diamonds with a local merchant, and with the proceeds, purchases passage to Athens on a schooner departing the next day. Kellan does not settle anywhere; he no longer needs sleep. That night, he returns to the abandoned quarry to refine and master his new powers. At sunrise, he stops the first carter who passes by and heads to the tailor. He retrieves the trunk and hires two porters to carry it to the harbor, where he embarks for the continent. The schooner stops in Constantinople and then continues on to Athens. In the Greek capital Kellan discovers printed books. They significantly differ from the manuscript parchments he was used to. As a well-educated druid, he knows how to read runes, and as a former subject of the now-vanished Byzantine Empire, he can read both the Latin and Greek alphabets. During his childhood, Galatia and its capital Ancyra had returned to Byzantine rule after being wrested from the Seljuk Turks by Christian crusaders—the Turks had conquered the region more than a century earlier. For this reason, his first druidic teacher had taught him the Arabic script used by the Turks.As an adult, having moved to the British Isles, he learned English, which—back when he was still human—was spoken mainly by commoners and considered a low-status vernacular. His ability to read, write, and speak so many languages was one of the reasons Cathbad had chosen him as his right-hand man. Strangely, Latin books are no

longer to be found. The bookseller explains that Latin has now survived only as the liturgical language of the Roman Catholic Church. The only books in that tongue are therefore Christian religious texts, which are banned in the Ottoman Empire for obvious religious reasons. So Kellan buys books in both Turkish and Greek on various subjects: geography, history, technology, economics, and agriculture. He needs to update himself on the modern world—books he will read avidly along the way. During the five-day voyage to Greece, Kellan discovers that his native region, shortly after his imprisonment, had been retaken by the Turks—who had lost it decades earlier after being defeated in battle by the Mongols. Galatia remained under Mongol rule for nearly a century before being conquered by a Turco-Persian tribe, and eventually falling into Ottoman hands. This is the great shift of the new age Kellan now finds himself in. Not long after his imprisonment on Santorini, a Turkish tribal leader named Osman rose to power over all other Turkic tribes and founded an empire that now encompasses the entire former Byzantine realm: Greece and the Balkans, the Middle East, all of Mediterranean Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. From him, his descendants began calling themselves "Ottomans." England, too, has changed completely. Once the barbaric and backward kingdom of his time, it now dominates all the British Isles—including Ireland—as well as the Caribbean, India, and, with bitter irony, the whole of North America. In the end, those damned Indians were inevitably subdued by the whites. When he lands in Athens, Kellan leaves his already read books behind on the ship and rushes to buy new ones. He wants to learn everything about the English and their new empire. When he lands in Athens, Kellan leaves behind the books he bought in Constantinople, having read them all during the voyage, and

rushes to buy new ones. While leafing through an English book, he realizes he cannot read the cursive form of the Latin alphabet. He buys a Turkish-English dictionary to learn the alphabet in its modern printed style, and purchases many more books and atlases about England and its dominions. From Athens, he secures a first-class berth aboard a passenger vessel bound for England. Ireland, now a colony within a vast global empire ruled from London, offers no strategic advantage. It is only logical to establish operations in the capital—a city that was once a wretched backwater. From his readings, he has grasped a timeless truth: even in this modern world, gold remains the key to domination. And Kellan can produce gold at will. London, after all, is the world's commercial capital—a place where gold opens every door. For Kellan, it is the only logical starting point. On the voyage, Kellan tries to gather as much information as he can about a world that is 500 years ahead of his own. The ship is full of wealthy Englishmen he would be interested to speak with to better understand this new world, but he doesn't even attempt to approach them. His English—learned from the Anglo-Saxons during his apprenticeship—is distinctly medieval. Speaking in such an antiquated tongue could raise suspicions. He prefers to keep a low profile, knowing that if the Druids and Shamans exist, they will already have heard of his escape and begun searching for him. They may even be on board. The journey continues, with the ship docking every two days in a different port on its way to England. During his discreet strolls across the decks, careful to avoid direct contact with the other passengers, Kellan notices an oddity. In the cabin corridors, several vases are filled with fresh flowers. These wilt within two days at sea, and each time the ship docks, an attendant replaces them. The only flowers he never changes are those placed

outside the royal suite—the most expensive cabin on the ship. Since departure, they have remained untouched. At first, Kellan wonders if he's mistaken. Perhaps he missed the attendant's visits while absorbed in reading in his cabin. But the final proof comes in La Coruña. Heavy seas prevent docking, delaying it until the following day. After more than three days at sea, all the ship's flowers have dried up—except for those outside the royal suite. They remain perfectly intact. With the help of a small tip, one of the sailors—a Turk—reveals to him that the royal cabin is occupied by a Swedish princess on a state voyage. She eats her meals in her cabin and only leaves for dinner. But he almost never sets foot in the dining room, leaving him no chance to glimpse her face or sit close enough to unravel her secret. Because not only does Kellan not need to eat, but he is also unable to do so, as he no longer possesses a functioning digestive system. His first test with food had taken place just after boarding. He had gone to the dining hall to help himself to a light breakfast, curious to see how his body would react, given that his internal organs—though still present—had also turned to metal. The food slid down into his stomach, but as soon as it arrived, a series of electrical discharges transformed it into plasma, which his body slowly reabsorbed. Yet it extracted no nourishment, since his now entirely inorganic body no longer required any. Rather, that useless digestive process tired him more than expected and, while underway, caused an unpleasant discomfort. Better this way, Kellan had thought the first time, realizing he had shed one of the weaknesses of the human form. Anyway, on the main deck, Kellan, while eavesdropping on various conversations, learns that the princess is a close relative of the royal family, returning from a visit to Constantinople. She is traveling with a retinue of diplomats and military personnel,

accompanied by their wives. At every dinner, the captain's table is reserved exclusively for them. On the final evening aboard, a gala ball takes place. Kellan skips the banquet preceding it, but arrives elegantly dressed in a dinner jacket. He spots the princess immediately in the crowd—surrounded by a throng of cicisbei, each vying for a dance. As he observes her, one detail catches his eye: her gown and hairstyle are lavishly adorned with a cornucopia of fresh flowers, so lush they seem still tethered to the vine. Yet this is not what captivates her suitors. Their attention is drawn to her generous décolletage, where a dazzling diamond necklace rests, shimmering atop her exposed bust. While the others remain entranced by jewels and flesh, Kellan's gaze drifts elsewhere. He notices a peculiarity in her coiffure. At first glance, a golden brooch appears to hold her hair in place. But on closer inspection, it reveals a handle and a curvaceous tip. It is no mere ornament—it is unmistakably a golden sickle. His intuition hasn't deceived him. Druids and shamans still exist, and that ritual blade is irrefutable proof. Given the sweeping changes the world has undergone during the half-millennium he spent inside the volcano—an era in which Celtic and Germanic peoples, once marginal tribal groups inhabiting the harshest corners of Europe, come to dominate the globe—Kellan finds it easy to imagine that many of these shamanized druids now hold high-ranking positions in modern society. If all of them exert the same influence over plant life as the princess—which seems more than likely—it means they too have developed powers tied to the stirring of nature's forces. Overcoming them will not be easy. As the ship enters the Thames estuary, preparing to dock near London Bridge, Kellan reflects on his next moves. His fellow Druids are undoubtedly imprisoned beneath other volcanoes as he

was. Cathbad is almost certainly the most heavily guarded of them all. Kellan's powers are already extraordinary, but not sufficient to free the others swiftly. Yet he cannot leave them captive. Without Cathbad's guidance and the support of his companions, he would never have defeated those accursed Druidshamans—beings who, through their Great Spirit or the fusion of earthly and celestial forces, acquired the individual and collective powers that led to his defeat and imprisonment, along with his master and his brethren. To return the world to its pre-shamanic state, he must first discover where the others are held, and then liberate them—beginning with Cathbad. It is no easy task, and certainly not one achievable in the short term. To succeed, he must recruit and train new Druids, prepare them for power transference, and establish a continental network of bases and allies to monitor and contain the enemy. Still, there is no urgency. Kellan is amortal—immune to injury, resistant to trauma, impervious to disease. He can afford to spend centuries assembling the pieces of what, once the half-breed heretics are eliminated, will become a new Druidic empire.

Set 4

Kellan disembarks in London. Aboard, he has exchanged a few precious stones for what he thought was enough cash to board the carriage of the city's most luxurious hotel. He checks in as Haziz Omer Efendi, a wealthy stone and precious metal merchant of Ottoman nationality. He takes the most luxurious suite available. At the hotel, they begin to treat him with much deference, thanks to his generous tips. But, as he learned in his readings, the economy of this world of the future is based not

really on gold per se—in the form of nuggets or coins—but on who has the facilities and the know-how to store and transfer it. In other words: the banks. So, as he goes up to his room, he asks the concierge to send him an official from the Anglia-Ottoman Trading Bank because he has a deposit to make. He had seen the bank's sign on his way to the hotel and liked the name. Despite his inability to read cursive, the bank's name appeared in Turkish with Arabic characters. The hotel's clerks try not to smile at Kellan's English, which sounds similar to Chaucer's. The manager, understanding the general hilarity, reminds the employees that it is normal for a well-educated Ottoman to speak old-fashioned, literary English. Considering what he spends on his suite, the man has to be a very cultured foreigner. Probably he knows English literature better than them all. An hour later, a company of porters arrives at the hotel with a trunk to be delivered under the name of Haziz Omer Efendi. It's an ordinary travel trunk, but devilishly heavy. It takes four hotel bellboys to carry it up to the wealthy guest's suite. Inside, the clothes conceal a bed of fine gold ingots that Kellan had forged from the wooden slats of his cabin bed. Soon after, a young bank official arrives at the hotel, presents his credentials at the front desk, and, in a flash, knocks on Kellan's door, followed by two energetic men. His name is Fehim Kumsal Albert Claiton; his father is English, and his mother is from Thessaloniki. Without asking too many questions, the official examines the gold in the chest. There are almost twenty kilograms of precious metal inside. He asks his attendants to bring him a scale and the case containing the mercury test. He weighs each piece, one by one, and scrapes off a few flakes to put into a mercury solution that reveals their purity. At the end of the count, Claiton is astounded by the results. It is, without doubt, the finest gold

ever to grace the London market. That is not all. Kellan also wants to deposit the rough diamond he had shaped in Santorini. When he shows it to Claiton, the man is astounded by the stone's size. He puts on his jeweler's goggles and confirms that the stone is pure diamond. It weighs around 8,000 carats. Its value is priceless and cannot be added to the deposit, Claiton explains. But the bank will hold the stone for him as a guarantee of its solvency. While the energetic men take away the box with the gold and the diamond, the banker prepares the papers to open the account and inscribes £900,000 as the value of the current gold. Enough for Kellan to start looking for a worthy residence. By day, Kellan goes out with the city's top real estate agents to visit the most exclusive mansions and cottages in their portfolio. By night, however, he prowls the city's alleys and seediest corners in search of suitable elements for his purposes. He identifies, one by one, the most skilled thieves, the most ruthless murderers, and the most shameless prostitutes—but also swindlers, pickpockets, dirtbags, and professionals ruined by alcohol and opium. Loose dogs, with no family and no ties, destined for ruin and death on the streets. For now, he cannot enlist them. But soon, they will be at his service.

Set 5

In the meantime, Kellan chooses to buy a villa with a vast park in a secluded and affluent suburb just beyond the edge of London. He signs the contract immediately, without even negotiating the price, as is customary in cases of such a substantial sell-

off. Once the compound is legally in his hands, one last piece is missing to begin the construction of his own organization. Kellan makes the rounds of the finest lute-makers in London and commissions a brand-new wooden flute from the best. He gives the luthier precise instructions regarding the shape and characteristics of the instrument he desires. When, after a few days, the flute is delivered to him at the villa, Kellan takes it in his hands and, with a long electric shock, transforms it into an iron flute made of an alloy closely resembling pure meteoric iron. The instrument is only a temporary solution, but it will prove useful for his immediate needs. He doesn't lose time. In the garden behind the main mansion of his estate, Kellan begins to play the melody of Cathbad on his new flute, summoning the dark forces of Nature. By subtly altering the musical notes, he commands these Obscure Forces to carve out an enormous cavern beneath the mansion—its ceiling upheld by megaliths, its interior furnished with rudimentary stone structures. This will be his secret hideout, the war room for orchestrating his future plans. The invisible entrance to this subterranean temple lies within a bank of special sand, crafted by Kellan himself. He has separated the vitreous grains from ordinary dirt; the expelled soil left behind a pool of pure, white, gleaming sand. For now, only Kellan can open it. At his command, the sand begins to whirl, forming a vortex that draws down anything—or anyone—standing above it into a sliding tunnel. Once the descent is complete, the sand swirls again, sealing the entrance with a compact, impenetrable barrier. To exit, steps carved into the base of the rock slide lead upward. Kellan need only reopen the entrance, and anyone inside can climb their way out. Now he needs people to fill it with. Kellan returns to the city's most squalid slums with a precompiled list of potential candidates.

He starts with the women. The filthiest prostitutes, the most ragged beggars, the most aggressive and antisocial hags are his first choice. He buys them with money, promises of profit, and tales of imaginary jobs that would lift them out of poverty and marginalization. His manner—his antiquated English, tailored clothes, and ease in moving through London's most dangerous dens—along with a flood of gold and silver guineas, convinces all these derelicts to meet the next day in a designated square, where carts will be waiting to take them to their destination. The following day, on carts he rented from a moving company, around fifty dirty, poorly dressed, and irate women arrive at the villa. They climb down one by one, and Kellan lines them up to give them their first instructions. He enters the main house and sits on a chair just inside the entrance. The women form a single-file line at the door, and he calls them in one by one to privately assign the promised money and work. Once inside, Kellan asks each woman to step forward and extend her arm. The poor souls, expecting payment, offer him their hands. But he swiftly seizes each by the forearm and presses his tattoo into their skin. From the first to the last, every woman is marked—without a single one, inside or outside the room, realizing it. At this point, with them under his control, he gathers them again outside and orders them into the servants' quarters, where they find several water basins. They are to wash themselves and dress in servant uniforms hung by size. Then, some of them begin cutting and arranging hair, filing nails, and cleaning the feet of their companions. Once ready, they return to him, and he begins assigning tasks. Within a few hours, the villa comes alive with maids, cooks, housekeepers, and general helpers. Recruiting the men is now child's play for Kellan. In the days prior, he had spent long hours at the national library, buried in the archives

of old London newspapers and gazettes. The crime columns were rich with stories of eccentric aristocrats hosting forbidden parties in their country estates. So Kellan shows up at the city's seediest taverns, richly dressed and accompanied by the three most attractive women he had previously tattooed—now styled as escorts. He approaches those he had already identified as the most dangerous cheats, thieves, murderers, and cutthroats in London, and invites them to a risqué party at his villa the following day. He spins them a tale: he and a few aristocratic friends are looking to have some fun with a group of working-class girls they've hired, and they want to spice things up with a few rougher types. To seal the deal, he hands over a pouch of gold coins. Many accept without hesitation. In one tavern, however, a thug decides to rob him on the spot rather than wait for the party. The man draws a dagger in a flash and slashes it across Kellan's throat—but the blade shatters in a shower of sparks. Kellan rises calmly, grabs the would-be attacker by the head, and with a theatrical gesture, crushes it like a melon. Then, as if it were nothing more than a handkerchief, he uses the headless body to wipe the blood from his coat. With inhuman strength, he hurls the corpse a dozen meters across the room. Kellan leaves the tavern amid a wave of terror, and word spreads quickly through the underworld. The next day, forty of the empire's most feared criminals stand at the gates—silent, deferential, as if something greater than fear had tamed them. They are greeted by alluring, half-dressed women who lead them to a figure who appears to be the madam. She, too, is scantily clad and explains that before joining the party, each man must first wash and be properly dressed. Drunk on the women's beauty and the promise of unspeakable pleasures, the men agree without protest. One by one, they are led into a specially prepared bath

chamber. But once the door closes, instead of a naked girl, they find Kellan—who, without ceremony, stamps a tattoo onto each man's arm and sends him back out to line up. When they're all marked, he orders them to undress. A torrent of water pours down on them from a cloud he conjures above. Under the tattoo's influence, the men feel neither cold nor discomfort. When Kellan deems them clean enough, he summons a warm sirocco wind that dries them almost instantly. Knowing exactly who each man is and what his specialty entails, Kellan has the women dress them accordingly: gardeners, laborers, coachmen and stablehands, workmen and guards. Each is equipped with a knife, should they need to deal with intruders or meddlers. In the weeks that follow, practically no one comes looking for the men and women Kellan has removed from circulation. Only two individuals—both men—show up at the villa asking about their missing companions and demanding money for their silence. They are let in under a pretext, tattooed, and put to work. After his first month in London, Kellan considers himself satisfied. London is a vast city, and the disappearance of a hundred degenerates—often without family and already marginalized by society—goes unnoticed. Every day, hordes of desperate people flood the streets in search of any means to survive. The void left by that group of criminals and prostitutes was likely filled within days. All the better for him. In this modern world, Kellan can build his private army without anyone noticing. In fact, if discovered by the police, he might even be seen as a benefactor—someone who rescues society's worst from the streets and converts them to civil life. But there's no risk of leaks or betrayal. Those who bear the tattoo not only obey Kellan's every command, even if self-destructive, but are also incapable of revealing anything they know about him or

his organization. If threatened, the tattooed become frenzied killers, ready to do anything to protect their master and all that concerns him—even to take their own lives if necessary.

Set 6

After organizing his ranks of servants, Kellan moves on to the next phase of his plan. To build his empire, he needs managers. To find the right candidates for the roles he intends to assign, Kellan returns to the slums. This time, he isn't searching for brutal degenerates but for fallen professionals. Casting his net, Kellan discovers Robert Russell—a young lawyer who, despite being a foundling, excelled academically and earned a scholarship to study law. After college, he seemed a promising prospect for English jurisprudence, but he fell in love with a Chinese prostitute, which led to a downward spiral into opium addiction. Kellan finds him sprawled, stoned, in a lurid opium den. He doesn't need to persuade or invite him to the villa. Kellan marks him on the spot. The man suddenly stands, completely sober, and follows his new master. Not far from there, outside a decrepit tavern for last-stage alcoholics, they encounter Marin Wayne—a former accountant and top manager in the imperial tax department's central office. After committing theft and accepting bribes, Wayne was disgraced and disowned by his family. He stands at the door, begging for change to buy a drink. So ravaged by alcohol, he doesn't even notice Kellan's hand as it grabs his arm and stamps the tattoo. Within moments, the man becomes fully lucid—for the first time in many years. Back at the mansion, after a bath and with tailored business suits fitted to them, Kellan appoints

Wayne as head of his growing financial operations. His tasks include managing the consignments of gold and silver, keeping accounts of the diamonds and gems Kellan produces, overseeing real estate, and tracking expenses and deposits. Russell instead will act as his lawyer operating from an elegant but discreet downtown office, where he remains the sole client. Kellan then visits Claiton, the officer of the Anglia-Ottoman Trading Bank, and tattoos him right there in his office. At the time, Claiton is merely one of the bank's junior partners, but within a few years, he manages to acquire the entire institution—thanks to Kellan's gold and the mysterious disappearances or sudden deaths of the other partners. The recruiting phase for Kellan doesn't stop here. He needs fresh new Druids for his personal army of deadly warriors. But it's a process that requires far more time than the previous "workforce acquisitions." First, with Russell as the frontman for the presidency, he establishes a charitable foundation that officially acquires Kellan's property and reclassifies it as an orphanage. The institution admits only "Nordic" foundlings—defined as those with white skin, blond hair and blue eyes, or red hair and green eyes. Kellan's women, dressed as charitable ladies, begin visiting every household in the poorest neighborhoods of London. Whenever they find suitable children—preferably those with abusive parents—they offer a substantial sum of money to buy them. The parents, lost in alcohol and toxic behaviors, are often quite happy to receive the money and give away one or more mouths to feed. For every child sold, they sign an affidavit that includes, among its clauses, the irrevocable forfeiture of parental rights. But there's no need for legal enforcement. After a few weeks, Kellan personally visits every house the orphanage had dealings with—and makes it collapse, burn, explode, or flood, killing all the occupants and

rendering his intake closed. Every boy or girl admitted to the orphanage receives the tattoo. From that moment on, they study and train. Before officially launching the orphanage façade-business, Kellan had already set his men to work, restructuring the buildings to accommodate classrooms, dormitories, and common areas. At the same time, with himself as the trainer, he assigned the most intelligent women in his crew to learn the subjects he wanted the children to study. Thanks to the power of the tattoo, the women were every day compelled to learn and study to the point of exhaustion. Within a couple of months, they were ready to begin teaching his young recruits. The curriculum includes music, art, and acting, along with writing, mathematics, and several foreign languages. Kellan personally trains the children in hand-to-hand combat, dagger use, and a variety of individual and group attack and defense techniques as part of their physical education. Shortly after the official opening of the orphanage, during a countryside walk with Russell to discuss business, as they pass near a farm particularly rich in flowers, a frenzied cat suddenly leaps out in front of them and tries to attack Kellan, tearing his jacket. Seized by a sudden fury, Kellan grabs the cat by the tail and squeezes so tightly that his hands begin to glow red-hot. In an instant, the cat is engulfed in a cloud of plasma and, a few seconds later, springs out seemingly unharmed. There's just one detail that doesn't add up. Before the encounter with Kellan, the cat was tawny-colored; after the plasma bath, its fur has turned anthracite gray. The transformed cat approaches Kellan meekly, and he picks it up, realizing that the feline is now made of silicon—just like him. His surprise doesn't last long, because just as he begins to stroke it, the cat dissolves into a cloud of dust. Kellan understands that if he learns to develop this

specific power, he could transform his young pupils into mighty warriors, restoring the druid guild to its former glory. So, while his little druids grow and study, Kellan spends his nights honing his powers in the underground temple—when everyone at the orphanage is fast asleep. At first, Kellan uses stray dogs and cats as test subjects, luring them into the villa compound with food traps, where his attendants are able to cage them. His trials—conducted on hundreds of specimens—prove to be a failure. The animals remain silicon-based for a few hours, but then inevitably crumble into a fine dust. One day, one of his men brings him an entire litter of kittens found in the villa's park, stuffed into a sack. He had to brutally kill the mother to take them. As the attendant descends into the temple, he stumbles badly and falls, the sack bursting open and releasing the kittens. They scatter across the room, whose floor is covered in silicon dust. The little creatures play innocently, but soon appear to fall into a trance. Kellan watches them closely and notices that all of them have dust on their noses. He collects a bit of it and decides to test it on humans. He first experiments successfully on the orphanage residents—young and old, male and female. The result is always the same: anyone who inhales the dust becomes hypnotized, willing to believe and do anything they are told. It's even more powerful than the tattoo. Kellan decides to try the powder on strangers. He spends many evenings in opera houses and literary cafés, or in taverns and brothels. Anyone who accepts his invitation for a drink or a conversation, after a discreet puff of powder, ends up hanging on his every word—believing even the most absurd lies. Some, under its influence, reveal intimate details, office secrets, sign blank checks, even offer him their homes and possessions. But Kellan has no interest in such trivialities. One evening, in the foyer of a theater

during intermission, he uses the powder on a well-dressed man and convinces him that the soprano, in the next act, will kill him with a stage sword unless he climbs onto the platform and slits her throat first. Kellan discreetly slips a dagger into his pocket. At the opera's climax, the man leaps onto the stage, draws the blade, and slashes the soprano's throat in a frenzy. Panic erupts in the theater. The police immediately apprehend the killer, who turns out to be a respected and renowned physician from London's upper class. The man has no recollection of his actions. He claims to have been inexplicably out of his mind, as if seized by a force beyond his control. According to the judge who sentences him to hanging, the motive for such a mad and brutal act remains unknown—especially since the man was known as a pious and devout member of the Anglican Church. Reading the newspapers, Kellan beams with satisfaction. He has had all the silicon dust collected by his cleaning women, and it is now stored in small barrels, ready for use. But the assilication experiments are far from over. In fact, they've only just begun. Perhaps animals are too delicate to withstand the full force of the energy Kellan channels into them. To succeed, he would need a powerful amplifier of his abilities—something he does not yet possess. That leaves humans. Unwitting solitary walkers in the woods around London are sprayed with the powder and brought to the orphanage, where they become test subjects for Kellan's experiments. The energy required to assilicate a human is far greater than for an animal, but the result is worth the effort. These men and women are transformed into docile golems, utterly obedient to their master. Their skin, hair, and eyes retain their color, but their flesh becomes metal—impervious to ordinary blades or bullets. The problem is that even these golems eventually disintegrate, though they remain active for

days rather than hours. It's as if they need a fixative to stay intact. He had already tried his flute's music on animals, but it had no significant effect—in fact, the druidic melody accelerated their decay. Still, he decides to try it on humans. This time, the result is the opposite: when regularly exposed to musical sessions, the golems maintain their atomic structure for several years. At the peak of his research, Kellan will discover that the maximum lifespan of a golem is around forty years.

Set 7

Within a decade, Kellan's first tattooed recruits reach adulthood, and their bodies are finally mature enough to be assilicated. From among the young men and women, he selects those with the most trained physiques, the greatest skill with weapons, and the highest performance in their classes. Those who are rejected remain within the organization but are reassigned to replace laborers, servants, instructors, and trainers who gradually die off. In the subterranean temple, Kellan brings in the chosen ones one by one. He assilicates them and stabilizes their structure using the druidic melody. Once the assilication process is complete, Kellan plunges his hands into a wide chest filled with specially prepared siliceous sand. When his hands are fully coated, he releases a burst of plasma that instantly fuses part of the silicon, which he then begins to shape. Once the sand cools, Kellan extracts a dagger of obsidian—extremely hard and razor-sharp. Upon contact with the silicon embedded in his hand, the blade electrifies, making it capable of slicing through metal and stone. He hands one to each of the assilicated. When all thirty or so youths have been transformed, Kellan gathers them in

the temple and gazes with satisfaction at his new army—what are, in every sense, the "new druids." From now on, they must call him Grand Druid. For Kellan, hearing his name chanted in unison by these extraordinary beings is music to his ears. They do not sleep, do not eat, do not feel fatigue. They are virtually invulnerable and can summon the forces of nature at will. However, they cannot disintegrate and reassemble elsewhere like their master, who also holds power over their life and death: he can dissolve them at any moment. The druids have only one vulnerability. If struck or pierced by a golden blade, they disintegrate in a flash of magnesium. Thus, to Kellan's great frustration, the golden sickles wielded by those heretical druids loyal to Allan can destroy them. And then there's the problem of their limited lifespan. For the basic druids, this isn't an issue—he can always produce new ones, better trained each time, since turnover at lower levels is inevitable. What worries him is the mortality of his managers. If he were to assilicate them too, they would eventually disintegrate. Yet he needs them to become amortal, like himself, because his plan requires time—and therefore, managerial continuity. Twenty years pass. In that time, Kellan immerses himself in language study, eventually mastering modern Turkish, Greek, Gaelic, English, French, Italian, and Spanish. He studies and masters subjects that could aid him in building his empire—such as economics, law, physics, chemistry, mechanics, engineering, and above all, extensive history and geography. Meanwhile, he tirelessly searches for the site where his companionsare imprisoned. With the aid of select druids, he combs through every book, magazine, and newspaper he can find in London. Yet even the oldest volumes and most obscure chronicles offer no clue—no mention of their location, no trace of the white-gold horn, nor of the melody

that had once subdued and bound them. History itself seems to have been rewritten. Not a single textbook acknowledges the Viking presence in America. The official narrative insists that a certain Christopher Columbus was the first European to set foot on the continent. But Kellan knows better. He knows Columbus arrived nearly five centuries after the Norse explorers—and three centuries after him. Even his field searches for possible descendants of Allan yield nothing. In twenty years of living in London, Kellan has never seen anyone wielding a scythe, nor has he heard whispers of individuals possessing extraordinary powers or abilities. If Allan and the others had truly summoned what the savages called the Great Spirit—drawing strength from the Forces of Nature and Heaven—then surely that power would have flowed into their children and descendants. Yet in all this time, neither Kellan nor his druids have encountered a single soul with extra-human gifts. The only anomaly the druids have observed is botanical: in certain residences, especially among the upper class, flowers and plants grow with unusual vigor, more luxuriant than anywhere else in the city. This peculiarity stirs a memory in Kellan—the princess's flowers aboard the ship that had carried him from Athens to England, blooming impossibly in salt air and shadow.

Set 8

One day, while Kellan continues his assilication experiments in the underground temple, he hears the bell near the sand pool ring out in full—a signal used as a doorbell. The Grand Druid opens the passage, and soon one of the druids arrives, one tasked with scanning the media for useful clues to identify

descendants of Allan and his allies. But this time, the druid brings something different. In a small article buried in the inner pages of *The Times*, a geology professor from King's College announces a conference, claiming to have made extraordinary discoveries regarding silicon fusion. Kellan immediately grasps the importance of the topic and, a few days later, attends the event punctually. The professor explains that silicon, after oxygen, is the most abundant element on Earth, though it is nearly impossible to find in pure form. Nonetheless, 90% of the Earth's crust is composed of minerals bonded with silicon in hybrid form. According to the scholar, the silicon found on Earth has cosmic origins—stellar dust, which rains daily upon the Earth and other planets in the solar system, is primarily composed of silicon. But silicon is not found only in comets and rocks; it is also essential to the life of animals and plants. Every human, animal, tree, or flower contains a component of silicon within. Once inside a living body—animal or vegetal—the mineral gradually transforms, altering its properties. Organic silicon changes its crystalline structure to adapt to the living being that hosts it, reinforcing the cells of its physical body. With a flash of insight, Kellan understands everything. Until now, his assilication process had focused on increasing the proportion of inorganic silicon within his druids' bodies, making it the dominant element of their composition. But this silicon renders them rigid and inert. Indeed, once they become silicon-based, they lose all ability to develop new skills and can only follow instructions, incapable of devising solutions. By instead stimulating the takeover of organic silicon over biological matter, he might have produced assilicated druids of a superior kind. His thoughts are interrupted by the professor's voice as he concludes the lecture and presents to

the audience a carafe filled with a grayish liquid. The academic pours himself a glass and drinks it in one gulp. He explains that organic silicon, extracted from plants and dissolved in water, has beneficial health properties—it strengthens the skin, nails, hair, blood vessels, and internal organs. It's also excellent for the brain, keeping it fresh, elastic, and hyperactive. Organic silicon, in short, is the true elixir of youth. A door slams violently, and the loud noise briefly draws the attention of the professor and the audience before the Q&A begins. Nothing to worry about—someone had simply left the room before the end of the conference. Back in his carriage, Kellan urges the coachman to drive faster. He is in a hurry to get home.In the days that follow, the Grand Druid orders his men to raid all the shelters for drunkards and vagrants in London, to find derelicts whose lives are already ruined by alcohol and drugs, and to make them disappear without ceremony. Within a few hours, Kellan has at his disposal a series of test subjects on which to conduct experiments. The first attempts at organic assilication fail miserably. Those poor devils, amid atrocious suffering, petrify only halfway before exploding in a mix of dust and organic matter. Overcome with frustration, Kellan is on the verge of giving up when he has an intuition. The underground temple is produced almost entirely through the manipulation of inorganic matter and therefore channels forces of a non-biological nature. Everything changes if the ritual takes place outdoors, among plants and animals. So the Grand Druid chooses a desolate, wooded area in the heart of the villa's immense park. He has his men cut down a series of trees and plants in the middle of the forest to form a clearing. Then he orders the erection of tall piles of mud and rubble arranged in a circle like dolmens, which he, with his power, transforms into pillars of the hardest stone.

He then places himself at the center and has more test subjects brought in. In an explosion of blinding light, Kellan succeeds in completing his first organic assilications. At that point, the tests begin. These new assilicated beings are immune to blades and bullets like the druids. They can summon the forces of Nature and obey the Grand Druid's every command, but when given a weapon they are incapable of using it to harm any living being, human or animal. Nevertheless, they demonstrate prodigious memory, skill and speed in calculation, and remarkable powers of synthesis and abstraction. Satisfied, Kellan reduces the unfortunate subjects to dust and summons Russell, Wayne, and Claiton, whom he immediately assilicates within the stone circle without hesitation. Now his team of managers is amortale, just like him.

Set 9

The Vikindians have long been in turmoil. Ever since the strange eruption of Santorini in 1761, they realize Kellan has escaped. They do not know what form he has taken or how he now manifests himself. During the immediate investigations following the escape, a report from a peculiar gentleman in Santorini—fluent in ancient Greek and archaic Turkish—yields little useful information. The trail of diamonds and precious stones he leaves behind as payment draws attention, but according to some accounts, he perishes at sea, devoured by killer whales. He boards a boat with three fishermen who never return. Later, another witness surfaces, claiming to recall the man's actual departure for Athens. Yet despite meticulous investigations, no trace of his journey can be found. That man—who comes

from Santorini, though no one remembers his arrival on the island—purchases multiple tickets to various destinations once in Piraeus. Where he embarks, and how, remains unknown. The Vikindians conclude that this mysterious figure can only be Kellan. Since then, as a precaution, surveillance shifts at the monastery in Cork have been quietly intensified, and each Vikindian tribe keeps close watch over its members to prevent any potential threat. As his organization and army take shape, the Grand Druid travels extensively across Europe to see with his own eyes how the world has changed during the five centuries of his captivity. Wherever he goes, he brings his retinue with him. He moves incognito, never drawing attention, and he rarely returns to London without some new tattooed adept to place at his service or to transform into a druid. In his journeys, Kellan also crosses to America to see how those Indian bastards are faring. He arrives in Virginia in 1784, when the English colonies in the New World have just gained independence from the mother country. The war of revolution in which the colonies fought against England has seen the Indians ally with the British. As a result of the war's disastrous outcome for the British, the Indians lose the trust of the Americans and, following the signing of the peace, they face treatment as a defeated people. It is quite a sight for Kellan: Indian lands expropriated, and Cherokee warriors shot by the revolutionary militia. But it is the French Revolution in 1789 that gives the Grand Druid a unique opportunity. During the years of revolution and the Terror, numerous monasteries are suppressed and their estates auctioned off. The Grand Druid instructs his people to carefully examine every manuscript and ancient book sold at auction, and if they find any evidence of his vicissitudes in the thirteenth century, they must purchase it

immediately, regardless of the cost. The Druids sent to France return to Kellan with several illuminated manuscripts. They are ancient incunabula clearly produced in Ireland, given the Celtic features of the illustrated figures, the manner of writing, the colors, and the symbols. Yet they reveal very little of the story of Cathbad and Kellan. One Druid, however, while browsing the black market, manages to find a handwritten diary of a French monk who had been on a pastoral mission to Cork in Ireland in the sixteenth century. A small notation in the margin of the main entry indicates that the monastery of Saint Olcan held a precious treasure from the Americas, which the abbot showed the monk. According to the monk, one of the devil's horns was broken in the fight against a Celtic saint. With that horn, playing a holy melody, the saint imprisoned devils in all corners of the world. There was only one copy of that holy melody, and it was preserved in the monastery itself. Kellan understands and remembers. When he was cornered by Allan in the Aegean, an impalpable and profound melody opened the seabed. A lava hand seized him and dragged him down into the earth's bowels. Then everything closed in, and he found himself a prisoner beneath the Santorini volcano. The melody was played by that horn, probably broken to Cathbad, who alone had transformed into an animal with horns. Allan must have discovered that melody during one of his hybrid shaman-druidic rituals, which he journeyed north to perform. Kellan knows that even that melody, if played backwards, can manifest malevolent magical contexts. With those two instruments—the horn and the manuscript—he will be able to free Cathbad and the others and wipe all the descendants of Allan and his flankers from the face of the earth. Kellan, struck by this reference, unleashes his druids all over Cork to hunt for information about the horn,

and he orders them to give him a full report on the monastery and the monks who live there. The first strange thing they notice, given the island's climate, is that the monastery is an explosion of flowers all year round. They also learn, by asking around, that the abbots of the monastery, since time immemorial, have belonged to the McAllan family—sons of Allan. Various Druids, disguised as pilgrims or visitors, enter the monastery, meet the abbot, and some even manage to be escorted into the library. Yet the monks and the abbot never mention the horn or the melody. Anyway, in recollecting local folklore, they stumble upon a popular legend about a reliquary in the church that houses a magical instrument from a distant land. It can only be the horn; there is no doubt about it. But the monks keep it hidden from public view, granting visitors access only to a small portion of the transept for mass or prayer, where this phantom shrine cannot be seen. The rest of the church remains off-limits to the public. After receiving these reports, the Grand Druid goes to see the monastery in person to plan a full-scale attack, but quickly realizes that the building is impregnable. The heretic druids, possessing both individual and collective powers, undoubtedly defend the monastery, rendering a frontal assault impossible. He would have to intervene himself for the attack to have any chance of success, but if he appears, his cover will be blown. At that point, the monks with the horn, the melody, and their powers would drive him back into one of Ireland's many extinct volcanoes. For the moment, there is no option but to return home and wait for the right moment to storm the convent. Two very poor little orphans, red-haired and green-eyed, stop Kellan as he walks through Cork, waiting to board the ship that will take him and his followers back to London. They try to sell flowers to

passersby. Their poverty is such that the flowers they offer are withered and half-dried. The two children appear healthy and of sturdy build, and they have eyes that reveal a deep intelligence. The Grand Druid pulls two gold coins from his hand and gives them to both. Then, when they are within reach, he hooks their arms and tattoos them. He will take them with him to London. Before heading to the harbor, the group makes one last visit to the monastery. As they approach the structure, a monk arrives in haste and asks them to lead the way. As he passes, the withered flowers that the little ones still clutch in their hands immediately become fresh again. Kellan does not attach particular importance to the episode, but he notes that this story of fresh flowers recurs a little too often.

Set 10

Kellan returns to London with the two children and places them in the orphanage. Then the Grand Druid, through his bank, begins to finance the Irish revolutionary movement with large sums of money, hoping to create chaos on the island and thus steal the horn in the general confusion. In 1798, the anti-English revolt breaks out, supported as well by French troops sent by the Directory. Kellan's druids, mingled with the rioters, push all the way into the monastery. Yet it is too late. When they stand before the sanctum sanctorum, they find the reliquary already open. Someone has already stolen the horn. However, over the next decade, the Napoleonic Wars make the Anglia-Ottoman Bank a highly influential institution. With the British government's insatiable hunger for gold to cover the military expenses of the campaigns against Napoleon—and

the bank possessing ever greater reserves—Kellan becomes one of the Empire's principal credit providers. More than one government wants to thank the mysterious owner of the bank with the title of *Sir*. Yet at Downing Street no one ever meets him in person, since the various ministers of the Exchequer deal exclusively with Claiton. There is also the fact that Haziz Omer Efendi, Kellan's assumed identity in London, is officially a subject of the Ottoman Empire. Robert Banks Jenkinson, Prime Minister at the time of Waterloo, before departing for Europe to attend the Congress of Vienna, asks Claiton what privilege the government might grant the bank, given that its gold supplies prove essential in defeating Napoleon's armies. The reply leaves the government astonished. The bank wishes simply to rename itself *Ottoman Bank* and requests that a VIP box at the Ascot horse races always be reserved for it, with the right to compete with its own stable as well. The 2nd Earl of Liverpool immediately has two specific decrees prepared to authorize these requests and signs them on the spot, considering that they cost the state coffers—already strained by the war effort—nothing at all. In 1816, Kellan founds the Ottoman Trading Company, a merchant enterprise linked to the bank in order to acquire real estate outside England and to establish a logistical network of ships and port warehouses to support the growth of the druidic organization and its expansion across the continent. With Napoleon on St. Helena and Europe devastated by wars, revolutions, and restorations, the Grand Druid sets off across the continent. Wherever he goes, thanks to his infinite reserves of gold and the rampant post-war continental inflation, he makes highly advantageous purchases. He opens the first overseas branches of his bank and company in cities such as Stockholm, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Paris, Vienna, and Zurich,

where he acquires significant real estate. Kellan bases his decisions about where to buy on what he observes during his walks through the cities. He selects properties in places where the residences appear most flourishing. Excluding cases of exceptional gardening skill on the part of certain landlords, the explanation for these extraordinary blooms, in his view, can only be linked to Allan & Co's scum-descendants. He is almost certain of it. Their connection to the Great Spirit—the Union of Forces—grants them powers, just as it did their ancestors. One of those powers most likely manifests in the lushness of the flora around them. Through their peculiar spiritual bonds, they flood their surroundings with bio-vital energy. For Kellan, these greening powers are undeniable, as many of the flower gardens he sees with his own eyes demonstrate. The Grand Druid witnesses gardens blooming and flourishing even in the snow, overflowing with flowers and leaves in the middle of winter. That is not nature. It is magic, if not outright sorcery.

Set 11

For his residence in Italy, Kellan chooses Florence, because, according to him, it seems to be the country's most flowery city. Surely, it must be packed with Allan's descendants. In Florence, the bank purchases a beautiful villa on the outskirts of the city and a piece of land just outside Porta a Pinti. The land includes a knoll. Beneath the knoll, the Grand Druid—thanks to the music of his flute and his powers over rock and soil—carves another underground megalithic temple. It is the only subterranean

facility outside London. This will be useful if Kellan needs it while in the Mediterranean and cannot return to England quickly. To disguise his druidic activities, the Grand Druid entrusts the knoll to the English community through the British ambassador to Tuscany, who transforms it into a cemetery for His Majesty's subjects. At the official inauguration of what Italians call the *Cimitero degli Inglesi*—the English Cemetery—much of the city's aristocracy, both Italian and British, is in attendance. Kellan, in his guise as a Turkish banker and benefactor of the community, follows the ceremony from the sidelines, observing the guests. There is no doubt that among them his enemies are concealed, for the cemetery, though it is still February, fills within minutes with blooming irises. Later, at the evening banquet, Kellan has the opportunity to meet the mayor of the city. He mentions his passion for botany and expresses his wish to visit some notable gardens among Florence's noble residences. The mayor, delighted to assist him, invites Kellan the following day to tour the botanical garden under the guidance of his assistant. That garden was founded by Lorenzo the Magnificent himself, a great lover of horticulture, who through his talent succeeded in transplanting to Florence plants that could scarcely survive at these latitudes. Kellan rubs his hands. He may be on the right track. Kellan, while visiting the botanical garden, is astonished by what he sees. Tropical plants live outdoors just as if they were in their natural habitat, even though in Florence, in winter, it snows and the temperature drops below zero. They show him a cacao tree that in summer was full of fruit, a banana plant with a bunch of bananas ripening, citrus trees, palms of every kind, cacti, and orchids. The Great Druid asks how such a marvel is possible, and the mayor's assistant replies that, since the time of Lorenzo, only the best gardeners in the city

have been chosen to take care of these plants. Each of them is carefully selected by a special jury made up of members of the city's elite, famous for their luxuriant gardens. Kellan asks if he can speak with one of the gardeners, but the assistant replies that none of them are present at the moment. Since it is still winter, the gardeners come by, in rotation, only once a week. As an alternative, the assistant suggests that he follow him to the garden's library, which has one of the largest collections of botanical texts in Europe. Inside, a portrait of Lorenzo de' Medici is kept, one that is never shown to the public. In front of the work, Kellan understands why: Sandro Botticelli portrayed Lorenzo in the clothes of a horticulturist, intent on tending to plants. A splendid portrait, but not very regal, and if made public it would diminish the figure of this enlightened ruler by bringing him closer to farm laborers and workers of the land. Kellan, however, couldn't care less about any of that. One detail alone strikes him. Lorenzo, at his belt, really does seem to be wearing a golden sickle. Having found what he was looking for, Kellan ends the visit. Before getting into the carriage, the mayor's assistant compliments him on how well he carries his 75 years, since he looks very youthful. Kellan is taken aback. The man explains that the cemetery lease contract was registered at the town hall, and the birth date of the lessor—Haziz Omer Effendi—appears as 1741. Kellan downplays it and replies with a joke, but inside the carriage he has a great deal to think about. As he crosses Florence, the Great Druid reflects on the fact that, in order to maintain his cover, he must stage his own funeral and replace his persona with that of a son or a grandson. The same applies to Claiton, Wayne, and Russell. For the first two there is no hurry. Claiton runs the bank from a private office, which he never leaves and from which he operates through

subordinates who are all tattooed. He has no dealings with the outside world and never sees anyone. Wayne, who directs the shipping company, does the same. However, their signatures appear on official documents, and someone, one day, might notice that their birth dates are too far in the past for them to still be alive in the present. Russell, on the other hand, has to appear in person to sign contracts or propose new ones. On paper he is over 80 years old, but his appearance is that of the forty-year-old he was when he was assilicated. Once back in London, they will have to organize, staggering them, their funerals and replace their personas with others who will claim to be their sons. Then there is the other matter that weighs on him. The two little orphans kidnapped in Cork, renamed Marlowe and O'Hara, are now more than twenty years old. Over the years they have proven to be not only the best students in the orphanage but also the best fighters. Kellan would like to put them at the head of the druids, but if he assilicated them like the others, they would live at most a few decades and then disintegrate. If he assilicated them to make them amortals, they would lose all their abilities as warriors. But now there is an opportunity: the Magnifico's sickle. The magical gold of which that instrument is made, if used in the assilication process, could allow him to transform the two boys without making them lose the warrior skills they have developed over the years and, at the same time, grant them those other abilities that the process allows one to acquire. The next day Kellan visits the Laurentian Library, founded by Lorenzo the Magnificent himself to safeguard his book collection and his personal writings. Accompanied by Marlowe and O'Hara, the Great Druid leaves a generous tip for the friar who guides them so that he will tell him everything he knows about the Magnificent, even down to

the smallest details. He learns that both Lorenzo's grandfather and father were great businessmen and skilled politicians, but no particular extra gifts were attributed to them. Their palaces were very austere and did not resemble the villas with luxuriant gardens that Lorenzo himself was the first to develop, dragging the rest of Italy into this enthusiasm. He truly did possess extraordinary talents beyond business and politics, and his green thumb was not even the main one. Lorenzo's son, Piero, was nicknamed "the fatuous" because he accomplished little or nothing. He had some talent for ball games, but he had never fully developed it. As for flora, Piero was a disaster. A rumor circulating in his time said that in his presence plants and flowers would even wither. For Kellan, everything is clear. Lorenzo the Magnificent, the only one in the family, had inherited—at this point clearly from his mother's side—that power which Allan and the other conspirators against Cathbad had passed down to their descendants. A power that must be developed, otherwise it remains in a raw state and cannot be used at will. When one of them cultivates and controls their power, they release around themselves a bio-vital energy that, in their presence, allows the plant world to flourish as if spring had just begun. Anyone who reaches this stage of development is rewarded with the assignment of a sickle made of an unknown gold, certainly not of mineral origin. Kellan ends his visit to Lorenzo's library by asking where the Magnificent is buried. The friar replies that the bodies of the members of the ruling house are all laid to rest in what are called the "Medici Chapels," which are an extension of the Basilica of San Lorenzo. There is no way to miss it. The dome of the chapels can be seen even from afar. The following night, Kellan darkens the sky with a thick blanket of clouds and brings down a dense fog over

Florence. The city sleeps deeply, it is pitch-black, and in the streets one cannot see a meter ahead. Kellan reaches the area around the Chapels without being noticed by anyone. Shortly after, he materializes inside. The interior is dark, and Kellan conjures a ball of fire that follows him and lights the scene. The Great Druid immediately finds Lorenzo's Tomb. Kellan takes out his flute and begins to play in such a way as to make the marble of the sepulcher resonate, allowing him to move the lid, which begins to levitate and rises more than a meter above the burial. Kellan climbs onto the monument and reaches the sarcophagus where, still gleaming, a golden sickle is proudly displayed. Kellan grabs it and climbs back down. Then, with another turn of the flute, he puts the lid back in its place. To leave the building and take the sickle with him, Kellan summons a powerful wind over the center of the city to cover the tremendous blast of air that, from inside, strikes violently against the heavy wooden door that serves as the entrance. The door is torn from its hinges and flies away as if it were made of papier-mâché. While in the surrounding houses the first lights turn on—those of people awakened by the crash—Kellan, undisturbed and unseen, returns to the villa with his precious loot. The next day all of Florence is in turmoil over what happened during the night. The morning newspaper speaks of a sudden airburst that struck the city. Meanwhile, Kellan, assisted by some druids, is in the underground temple intent on assilicating Marlowe and O'Hara. When the ceremony reaches its peak and the bodies of the two boys, who are holding each other, are covered by a ball of plasma, Kellan throws the golden sickle, which strikes the cocoon of light. Blinding rays burst out, illuminating the hall as if a small sun had been lit. The light floods everything for several interminable moments. When it is all over, Kellan, who has

fallen to the ground, looks at his burned clothes before getting up and noticing that the two boys are safe and sound. The same cannot be said for the other druids present in the room. The assilicated ones have been pulverized, and of the merely tattooed ones only a small smoking heap of ash and bones remains. Kellan approaches the boys and, upon touching them, feels the silicon that has permeated their bodies. It is a metal harder and more compact than that of those assilicated through the normal process. Kellan, with a knife, tries to strike Marlowe, but the blade disintegrates. Excellent. Their assilication is complete. Kellan then hands a dagger to the two boys and asks them to duel without hurting each other. Both Marlowe and O'Hara have no trouble with weapons. Then the Great Druid takes a handful of coins from his pocket and instructs the boys to catch them in mid-air. Kellan throws the coins upward, and the two druids snatch them all at incredible speed without letting a single one fall. Immediately, point-blank, Kellan asks them—without counting—what value each of them has in hand. Both Marlowe and O'Hara answer without hesitation, and upon counting, their answers prove correct. Before leaving for London, the Great Druid gathers the few surviving druids who will remain in Florence and gives them the instructions they must follow, which are identical to those Kellan has left to the occupants of the other residences scattered across Europe. Their task is to roam the city and its surroundings in search of derelicts or orphans to send to the orphanage in England. They have to catch them with some kind of bait, take them to the mansion, clean them up, and drug them. Immediately afterward they must take them to the nearest port—Livorno, in the case of Florence—and hand them over to the Ottoman staff, who will arrange for them to be boarded onto one of the company's

ships. In addition, as with the other residents in the various Druidic villas, the druids of Florence must also gather as much information as possible about those living in the houses with the most overgrown gardens.

Set 12

In January 1817, Kellan's men, vigilant in their watch over the flower-filled mansions of London, notice a household where a little girl named Caroline resides. It is she who looks after the flowers in the house; she has roses blooming in the garden outside even in winter. The Grand Druid goes to observe the little girl in person and decides to find out more. One morning, while she is in the garden alone, Kellan approaches the railing. He is holding a vase with a rose cutting inside. Kellan pretends to be a dejected man wandering about in despair because his rose has died, a cherished reminder of his dead wife, and he does not know how to tell the children who love their mother so much about the flower's death. The child becomes curious, feels moved, and calls the man to the gate. She looks at the rose and tries to console him. She tells him not to be sorry because the rose is not dead. While Kellan holds the vase, the girl touches the cutting and begins to caress it. Before long, in the vase, there is a green plant with three white roses in bloom. The gentleman thanks her and leaves. Kellan now has proof that people with extraordinary powers exist. And since the girl's family name is Liklater and they come from the Shetland Islands, there is no doubt about their Viking origin. So his hypothesis is correct: the descendants of Allan and his druids and shamans still exist; these descendants have powers, including that of making flora

flourish. That little girl is far too young to have fully developed her power or to possess a sickle. But she is learning something, given how she made the roses bloom again. Now Kellan knows how to recognize them.

Set 13

In the same year, Kellan takes one more step in the creation of his small empire. The Grand Druid assembles a team of the best Druids and, together with Wayne and Russell, sets off for Constantinople. He settles into a beautiful palace on the Bosphorus and spreads uncontrolled rumors about Omer Aziz Efendi's wealth. It is a name he has never used in Turkey, so there is no need to change it. Kellan knows that in the capital of the Ottoman Empire there are many headaches for the government to deal with. Numerous wars and local uprisings continually drain its finances. So the Ottoman Bank, in the person of Russell, proposes to finance, at no cost to the sultan, the maintenance of several battalions of janissaries and promises to give him a shipload of already-paid-for ammunition just waiting for orders to set sail, plus a series of stones and jewelry for the sultan's wives. In addition, Russell butters up the grand vizier of the Empire with a case of raw gold and a variety of stones for his ladies, prompting him to accept the offer without raising any objections. Blinded by gold, no one in the Ottoman nomenklatura investigates the mysterious origin of the donor and his fortune. Also because, in exchange for his favors, Omer Aziz requests only to hold a perpetual governorship over the small and marginal Mediterranean island of Nysiros. Even more, he will transform it into a formidable fortress to safeguard the

Anatolian coast, where there will be an absolute ban on landing on the island or sailing around its waters for foreign vessels. The bank will construct the buildings, equip them with cannons, and recruit the men, and Omer Aziz's shipping company will provide the warships and merchant ships — at no cost to the imperial coffers. The sultan, without hesitation, signs the investiture decree. He has something more important to look at. He and all his intelligence forces are busy investigating the coups that some of the courtesans regularly plot. A few weeks later, the mostly Greek inhabitants of the island suddenly see a mass of workers, building materials, and machinery arriving. Within a short time, fortresses, watchtowers, communication trenches, and gun emplacements are erected. Then the soldiers arrive. They are dressed in Turkish style, with a rather gaudy turban covering their hair. Therefore, the locals remain unaware that these men, with their light hair concealed, are neither Turkish nor Anatolian. They are Druids, not Ottoman soldiers, and they are not even human beings but silicon golems. None of the islanders can notice this because the army uniforms cover their entire bodies, and they wear gloves and boots to hide any visible detail of their form. In the meantime, the Grand Druid has the caldera of the volcano surrounded by a large wall that forbids unauthorized persons to enter. He restores the crumbling ruins of the Druids' houses, turning them into a luxurious and comfortable modern village. Officially, that is the new governor's residence. Naturally, the Grand Druid excavates an underground megalithic temple around the volcano's caldera, with openings looking into the lava. The works and new structures devastate the island, which sees all its trees cut down and slowly turns into a barren, semi-arid rock. They put the small community of residents under strict

surveillance, reduce their freedom of movement, and allow them to go out to sea only for fishing — all for reasons of military security. The Druids run the only school for children, as well as the only grocery store. The few residents, who are often illiterate and born into servitude, do not ask too many questions because, thanks to the new management, they get their foodstuffs at bargain prices. In fact, the imperial navy — specifically three ships of The Anglia-Ottoman — provides the necessary supplies, shuttling to the mainland. In turn, two of them, fully armed, patrol the sea around the island. To avoid leaks, the new governor requires all those who must leave the island to obtain a special permit, which only the governor himself can issue. Even if it is a remote possibility, when faced with such a request Kellan tattoos the petitioner to ensure that, while he or she is away from home, they will remain silent about the events in Nysiros and refrain from mentioning him or the Druids' activities. During the various stages of his renovation plan, the Grand Druid manages to establish communication with the orcas of the Aegean, distant descendants of those who joined his pod when he was a metal fish. After many weeks of gentle approaches and magical melodies played on his flute, the orcas, now fully tamed, move en masse into the waters around the island, protected by the ban on any ship approaching the military zone. Kellan then trains them regularly, turning them into a formidable instrument of defense and offense, always at his disposal. Clearly, the Vikindians are closely monitoring the island, given the Druids' strong attachment to it and Kellan's potential desire to return there. Nevertheless, both the Vikindians who gather rumors in Constantinople and the Vikindians of Santorini, who are accustomed to the militaristic impulses of the Ottomans, find the story of the new fortress—skillfully constructed by

an affluent pasha—to be credible. Because of the widespread corruption within the Turkish administration, the sale of titles and offices is almost the norm for the Ottomans. So the people of Santorini do not pay much attention to the novelty.

Set 14

After the Mediterranean interlude, Kellan returns to London in 1819, when Caroline is just twelve years old. Marlowe and O'Hara have proved capable and reliable in the years between their assilication and their return to London. The military organization of the entire garrison of Nysiros was their work. Now it remains to be seen how they perform in action. To test them, the Grand Druid plans to use them in Caroline's kidnapping. One day they reach the house, where they find the young girl in the garden tending to her plants. With an excuse, Kellan manages to get himself admitted into the cottage garden while Marlowe and O'Hara climb over the fence and surround Caroline. The trapped little girl notices that the two lads' hands are as cold as metal and that the tattoo on their arms pulses and seems to be alive. The Grand Druid intends to tattoo her, but as he grasps her arm, he fails to produce light or heat, causing the siliceous sand to slip onto her skin and fall to the ground. Caroline, frightened, begins screaming for help, and out of the house come her father and some servants, who see a man giving orders to two young men trying to drag the girl away. The men draw their sickles. At the sight of those armed figures, the Grand Druid dissolves into a bubble of plasma and reappears in the street, while the two Druids flee after summoning various natural forces: wind, fog, and rain with

lightning. The Grand Druid, safe in his residence, wonders what went wrong with that little girl. The tattooing process, like it or not, works on everyone, so how can these bastards be refractory to it? Then he has an epiphany: they can indeed receive the tattoo, but only if they are willing—that is, if they give their consent. Therefore, in order to capture one, one must circumvent him or her. Caroline's parents immediately alert the Vikindian leadership to the incident, signaling Kellan's presence in Europe for the first time. The tattoo that Caroline saw, the metallic coldness of his helpers, their leader disappearing in a blinding flash, and the unleashing of natural forces were clear signs that Kellan was behind it all and that, by now, he had built a band—if not an army—of Druids capable of summoning the Forces of Nature. The Vikindians raise their alert level and unleash their detectives, but they are unable to discover even a vague trace of Kellan. There is nothing abnormal in the police reports, in the land-registry archives, or in the tax files.

Set 15

Meanwhile, the Grand Druid orders his Druids to scour the slums of London and search all the taverns, inns, and opium dens. They are to take a withered flower or a dried plant with them and talk to and entertain as many people as they can. If the flower or plant comes back to life, then that man or woman is to be watched, followed, and stalked. The idea is to find some penniless people of the Allan kind and, with the lure of money or other material goods, manage to wrest their consent to be tattooed. After months of unsuccessful searches, the Druids come across a drunken former sailor and a young

opium-addicted prostitute. By now, in the grip of alcohol and drugs, the two can't properly revive even a small plant and can't handle much of their powers, which are so faded as to be barely recognizable. And if they ever had a golden sickle, they have long since sold it. The Grand Druid introduces himself to both of them, and with a few bars of gold, gems, and banknotes, he convinces them to give up their arms. After the tattooing process, the Grand Druid takes the two to the villa and places them under strict observation. The tattoos constrain their will, albeit not completely, and to varying degrees depending on each individual. Kellan cannot make them semi-siliceous or fully assilicate them. He can, however, stimulate their powers. The girl has the ability to rejuvenate wood, while the sailor can walk on water as if it were a bed. But that is not why he captured them. A few days after their capture, on a steel steamship flying the Ottoman flag and owned by his shipping company, the Grand Druid and some of his Druids set sail for Nysiros. The prisoners are locked in cell cabins made of very thick metal and are numbed by the hypnotic powder administered by Kellan. They enter the island's militarized port, and the Druids disembark the two prisoners, surrounded by armed guards. The prisoners are taken to the volcano compound. When the time for the ceremony comes, late at night, the temple below and the rim of the crater are filled with Druids who, torches in hand, recite a mantra evocative of the Forces of the Earth. Kellan, with his flute, plays Cathbad's magical melody. Waves of plasma, stirred by the vibrations of the flute and the recitation of the mantra, begin to gather in the caldera, causing the magma to bubble up. At one point, they bring in the two prisoners, dressed in simple white tunics. The tattoo on their arms pulses and animates furiously as their brains are clouded by the hypnotic dust. Kellan

announces to the assembly that today is a special moment. At last, the Druids will have at their disposal a weapon that will make them all powerful. Shouts of joy rise. Then, once silence returns, Kellan begins to play the melody on his flute in reverse to summon the Dark Forces of Nature. The waves of plasma grow angry, making the volcano's lava boil with fury. When the boiling roar reaches its peak, the Grand Druid pushes the two unfortunates into the lava. As they enter the incandescent magma, the lava forms a boiling ball of plasma and explodes into what looks like a thousand sparks of molten metal. However, as the sparks descend, they cool, and when they hit the ground, they transform into black metallic ouroboroi. It is the force of their power that, on contact with lava, sheds its fleshly body and finds new life in this intelligent metallic form. The Grand Druid picks one up and shows it to the Druids. He tells them that it is an ouroboros of meteoric iron—or rather, that it is made of a ferrous metal with the same characteristics as meteoric iron. Originally intended as an instrument of blessing, this type of ouroboros has now transformed into a lethal weapon of death and vengeance. Shouts of joy rise again. The ouroboros is the size of a hand and can be carried at all times. In this kind of ouroboros, the three snakes still hold the tail of the one in front of them in their mouths, as in the tattoos, but their heads face outward. At the first shake, the snakes' eyes turn red. This means that the ouroboros is armed. At the second shake, sharp blades emerge from the snakes' mouths, as if they were their tongues. The Druid who controls the object manipulates the intelligent metal that composes it. Therefore, an ouroboros, when thrown toward someone or something, always reaches its target before returning to its original thrower. To give a practical demonstration of how the object works,

some Druids carry a goat to the caldera's rim, placing it at the highest and farthest point from the Grand Druid. When the goat is in position, Kellan throws the armed ouroboros at it; it whirls with a hissing sound, severs the animal's head, and then returns to the thrower's hand. Shouts of jubilation follow. While the Druids collect the ouroboroi, they toss the goat's remains into the volcano. The Druids now have enough ouroboroi for everyone present, with even more left to distribute to those who remained in the residences. In view of the success of the ritual, the Grand Druid instructs his personnel scattered across Europe to search for other easy-to-cheat Allanites. Every time his men find a suitable one, even when searching the countryside, they alert the Grand Druid, who comes to whatever town is nearby and proceeds to ensnare and tattoo them. They assess the victim's power, drug him, interrogate him to extract additional information, and transport him to Nysiros, where he serves as the primary ingredient for ouroboroi production. In any case, Kellan and his men are only able to make a few successful captures per year. During interrogations, the Grand Druid manages to extract little information from the prisoners. Kellan now knows they call themselves Vikindians, but he knows little else. As Kellan does with his Druids, the Vikindians disseminate minimal information about their organization, leaving the prisoners under the Druids' control unaware of their internal structure or the identities of their leaders. They only know that they have Indian ancestors in their family tree. Often, these derelict Vikindians are unaware that they have any power and cannot even imagine what it might be. They are only aware that they have some positive influence over plants. It is a clear sign that, apart from the ability to invigorate flora—which is an innate faculty—the personal power of the

Vikindians must be specifically developed, and to do so, one must be guided by someone. It is likely that Vikindians who lose themselves in vice during their youth are kept in the dark about who they are and who they could become. None of them has a golden sickle or has ever heard of one. Kellan deduces from this that, once a Vikindian has developed power, he no longer falls into temptation, thus strengthening himself as an individual. Consequently, the sickle is somehow connected to the development of personal power and to having become stronger because of it.

Set 16

In 1829, due to the credible limits of human lifespan, the Ottoman Company faked the death of its founder, Aziz Omer Efendi, staging a false funeral in London. The funeral had been announced in the newspapers but was held privately, and no one had been invited to attend. A brief notice stated that his son Vadim Burham had taken over the company's ownership. In order to impersonate his new character, it is necessary for Kellan to change his facial features. The music does not alter the metal he is made of, and he certainly cannot strike his own face with a hammer, because no hammer is strong enough to dent his body. The only way is heat. He climbs onto the roof of the orphanage and gathers a mass of black storm clouds above himself. Kellan makes the clouds rub against each other in a turbulent motion so that they become charged with electricity, and then, when they are at maximum charge, he draws a powerful lightning bolt onto his face. Because of the extreme heat, the metal softens, and Kellan, with the music of the flute, manages to

alter his appearance just enough before the metal hardens again. The idea is that everyone will think Vadim Buram resembles Omar Aziz like a drop of water, yet is still a different person. In his room, as he looks at himself in the mirror to get used to his new appearance, he thinks that by increasing the power of the electrical discharge—and therefore increasing the time during which the metal remains malleable—he might even be able to change his face completely. After completing all the formalities of the succession, the Grand Druid and Russell sail for Constantinople, where Vadim Buram is expected at the imperial palace to obtain from the sultan the confirmation of his father's titles and privileges and to renew the governorship of Nysiros. Sending gold to the imperial coffers and providing precious stones and jewelry for the sultan's harem has already secured the sultan's favor. Signing the official investiture parchment is only a formality. And there is no danger of anyone recognizing Kellan through a revealing slip, because the old sultan who met Aziz is long dead, and the current one has exiled his predecessor's court to the furthest reaches of the empire for fear of palace coups. The day before the palace meeting with the sultan and the grand vizier, Kellan and his entourage take a tour along the Bosphorus. In truth, Kellan is looking for a residence in Istanbul and wants to have a look at the villas overlooking the bay from the European side of the city. As he strolls through the neighborhood, he sees the Galata Tower up close. From afar, it seems to tower majestically over the strait when, in fact, it is half ruined and in a state of disrepair. Kellan decides to claim the tower, and he will ask the sultan for it the following day. Kellan and his Druids discreetly position themselves around the tower compound, summoning the Dark Forces of Nature. A moment later, a sudden fire breaks out, enveloping the tower.

Immediately afterward, a strong breeze blowing in from the Bosphorus begins to feed the flames, which gather even more vigor. The tower becomes a frightening torch. The capital's fire brigade arrives, but the intensity of the fire prevents them from extinguishing it and saving the structure. The commander gives up hope of saving it, declares the tower lost, and orders his men to stand by so that the fire does not spread to the rest of the district. The Grand Druid and his acolytes present themselves to the commander and ask permission to intervene. The commander, with sarcasm, asks whether they are mad. The heat is unbearable, even at their distance. Kellan asserts that he is the son of an imperial governor, and the commander shrugs his shoulders. If they want to risk their lives, they are free to do so. They must know, however, that it is a suicide mission for him. Kellan and his men pick up buckets and hoses and, with apparent reckless disregard for danger, launch themselves into the fire. Seen from the outside, they seem to disappear into the flames. The commander orders his men to concentrate the jets of water toward the point where they entered, but it is all in vain. The water from the fire brigade does not affect the extent of the blazing wall of fire in the slightest. The commander desperately covers his face with his hands, fearing the trouble he will face from the Grand Vizier for allowing a noble gentleman to die in such a foolish manner. But to his surprise, the fire begins to diminish in intensity. Due to their composition of silicon and their ability to control the elements, Kellan and his Druids are immune to fire and heat. From inside the flames, they make the wind stop blowing while they smother the fire with swirls of sand and water bubbling up from the ground. From outside, no one notices anything. When the fire has subsided, the fire brigade intervenes to put the flames out for good. Kellan and

the Druids emerge blackened and wearing burned clothes. The commander throws himself at them and congratulates them on their heroic gesture, which saved one of the city's most important monuments. The people in the streets applaud and carry them around the city in triumph. News of Vadim Burham and his soldiers' heroic feats reaches the palace immediately. That very evening, Kellan receives a summons to the palace. When, together with Russell, he stands before the sultan, he cannot believe his ears: he has not been summoned early merely for saving the tower. Kellan does not understand. The Grand Vizier explains that the political situation in Greece is boiling over and that the first revolutionary uprisings have begun, demanding Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire. Yesterday, a flotilla of Greek privateers attempted to attack an armored Ottoman ship along the coast of Anatolia. The ship was bringing back to Constantinople the proceeds of taxes collected in the African provinces. The assault occurred near Nysiros and, fortunately, the men of the fortress immediately came to the rescue of the Ottoman vessel. With their cannons, they sank several of the attackers' boats and put the rest to flight. The gunboats of Nysiros then escorted the ship to the port of Izmir, where it was taken over by the imperial navy. The regent of the fortress has not yet notified Kellan of the incident, leaving him pleasantly surprised. Then the sultan, as thanks to the garrison of Nysiros for saving the empire's economy, grants Vadim Burham the hereditary right of governorship over the island of Nisyros and the title of Pasha, also hereditary. The sultan also requests that Kellan assume responsibility for managing the Galata Tower. The Pasha may convert a portion of the tower into his private residence, but he must dedicate the remaining structure to the city's most formidable

defensive works. This entails installing an enormous metal chain between the tower and Topkapi. During normal times, the chain would lie underwater, but in times of crisis it would stretch across the strait, sealing it off and preventing ships from passing. Any vessel attempting to do so would have its masts broken and be rendered immobile. A mechanical system for tensioning and releasing the chain will operate from the tower. Naturally, he will bear the cost of renovating the building, installing the chain, and assembling the machinery. He must also provide military personnel who are always prepared to operate the mechanism. Vadim Burham Pasha, still amazed by the windfall, enthusiastically accepts the arrangement. Gold costs him nothing. And he can produce warriors at will.

Set 17

In 1830, amidst the ongoing casting of the iron chain, the Grand Druid takes part in the Great Derby at Ascot with his own stable. Many residents of the flower-blossoming houses—as his Druids call the Vikindians—would attend the event, giving him the chance to know who they are and observe them closely. It is not difficult to identify them; all Kellan has to do is follow the abundance of lush flowers on men's jackets and ladies' caps. The Ottoman Bank enjoys exclusive use of a gazebo among those of the other racing stable owners, offering a prime view of both the competition ground and the VIP audience. Kellan and his staff watch the race from there. He has hired Fergus for the Derby, the best jockey of the moment, and he wants Fergus

to be assigned a horse that is not a dud but not a champion either, because he wishes to put him to the test. In fact, the jockey's surname is McAllan, he has Irish ancestry, and he tests positive in the plant-reflourishing test. He is a first-hand, real descendant of Allan and a pure Vikindian. This is not the only reason the Grand Druid hired Fergus to ride for his stable and participate in the race. Kellan trusted that little Caroline, who is now a woman, would also be at the racecourse. To be precise, poor Caroline is already a young widow. The Druids have been closely monitoring her home and movements since the day of the abortive abduction, and Kellan knows many things about her. He also knows more than she does about her husband's death in Afghanistan. It was the just punishment that meddlers deserve.

Set 18

Caroline's husband was Dan Wight, a captain in the Dragoons, whose regiment often operated in foreign theaters. But when they were in London, they were responsible for escorting the shipments of precious metal that came in and out of the Bank of England. At that precise moment in history, to finance the long war against the Ashanti in Africa, the British government needed precious metal and, as on other occasions, had turned to the Ottoman Bank, which always had plenty of gold. Transfers from the Ottoman Bank's deposits to the Bank of England were therefore quite numerous, forcing Captain Wight to work overtime. One day, when the Grand Druid is at the bank to sign some documents, Wight arrives with his regiment to escort yet another convoy of crates filled with gold bars. Two officials

from the Bank of England also travel in one of the armored carriages used to transport the crates. Upon their arrival at the bank, the soldiers gain access to the vault to retrieve the cargo. The two officials, meanwhile, go up to the offices to sign the takeover documents. Inside the vault, several Ottoman employees and caretakers assist the soldiers with the loading operations. Wight notices that the Ottoman men are wearing thick jackets that cover their arms. One of them, caught up in the heat or simply seeking ease of movement, removes his jacket, and Wight sees—through the thin fabric of his shirt—a striking black tattoo that seems to pulsate as if it were alive. The design appears to depict snakes in motion, but before Wight can fully observe it, the employee, aware of being watched, swiftly puts his jacket back on. During the unloading of the crates in the basement of the Bank of England, one of the two officials—the elder one—falls slightly ill, and in the confusion of the moment, Wight finds the Ottoman receipts in his hand. He reads a name under the legal representative's signature: Russell. He also sees the signature of the administrator but can make out only part of it, *Clai-something*, and, largest of all, a signature in Ottoman calligraphy, which he cannot read. Wight recalls the stories his wife told him about the attempted abduction she suffered as a child, carried out by men with snake tattoos that moved around their arms. Perhaps these are the same kinds of tattoos the Ottoman bank employees hide under the thick fabric of their jackets. They could be connected to the thugs who tried to kidnap his wife in her infancy. The captain inquires about the location of Russell's practice, and one day he unexpectedly appears there, posing as a customer. The clerks—also wearing thick jackets—explain that the firm does not deal with common cases, and that the lawyer is not

there anyway. He is very busy with his charity work. At the moment, he is, in fact, at the orphanage of which he is rector. Dan has never heard of anyone named Russell serving as the director of any orphanage, and yet his wife Caroline is deeply involved in charitable activities for orphans. At various charity events, he and his wife have met every single orphanage director in London, but he has never met this Russell. Dan then proceeds to the post office, where he pays a brat to gain entry and send a telegram on his behalf. He gives him the money and the message, which lists Russell's office as the receiver and a fictitious "Agent Ottoman" as the sender. Dan covers his face with a large scarf during his interactions with the boy, hoping to conceal his identity and avoid later recognition. The message reads: "Problems—documents—gold boxes. Intervene immediately." Shortly afterward, a messenger comes out of the post office to deliver the telegram. Dan, hiding not far from the lawyer's office, watches the messenger enter and leave. Moments later, a hurried clerk emerges and boards a carriage. He is holding the telegram. Dan follows him and arrives at the orphanage. To his amazement, the complex is quite large. Children are playing in the meadow and, as they scamper about, their tattoos are in plain sight. Dan observes from the fence as the clerk from the law office delivers the telegram to a man in a suit, who is standing beside a dark figure wearing a black habit. The figure's face cannot be seen. The man in the suit should be Russell but, to Dan's great astonishment, the lawyer doesn't even read the message; he hands it directly to the dark figure, who tears it up with a sardonic laugh. Meanwhile, Dan notices that the children's tattoos pulse and appear to move whenever they approach the man in black. As they walk away from him, the tattoos return to stillness. That black-clad monk

must be Kellan, the Grand Druid. Wight would like to tell his wife immediately what he has discovered, but she is staying in the Shetland Islands to visit her relatives, and he has no idea how to contact any Vikindian chieftains. Meanwhile, two housekeepers spot the captain spying from the fence and raise the alarm. Dan attempts to escape but is quickly surrounded by Druids with obsidian swords drawn. He fights hard, but he is unarmed, and there are too many of them. They immobilize him while waiting for the Grand Druid, who, upon arrival, puts him to sleep with his hypnotic powder. Kellan knows the man: he is Caroline's husband. Since he is not a Vikindian, Kellan tattoos him to ensure he does not reveal his discovery to anyone. He then instructs Russell to give a generous wedding gift to the daughter of the Chief of the Admiralty—a wedding all of London is talking about—and to arrange for Wight to be sent as far away from London as possible, and as soon as possible. The Chief is a renowned greedy and corrupt man who secretly uses the Ottoman Shipping Company to send the gold—fruit of his briberies—to Uruguay, where it is deposited in a local bank for the day he retires. He will promptly comply with the request concerning Wight. At the same time, the office responsible for assigning soldiers to the various army departments will also recruit, under bogus cover names, Marlowe and O'Hara into Wight's regiment. One of the lieutenants in that office is a hard-headed gambler with a large debt to the Ottoman Bank, so he is practically on the bank's payroll. He will take care of the assignment without saying a word. Dan wakes up the next day in his bed with no recollection of what he saw. His wife does not return in time to see him again and discover the tattoo because, within two days, Wight receives immediate orders to embark for Afghanistan. Once in Asia, during a firefight with

the Peshmerga, Marlowe and O'Hara use their ouroboroi to kill Wight. Then, in an attempt to hide the tattoo, they set Wight's body ablaze before fleeing into the wild. The Army will record them as men missing in action. Months later, Caroline receives the ashes of her husband in a small box wrapped in the Union Jack.

Set 19

Fergus, the legendary American jockey, despite the half-dud they gave him to ride, manages to win the race in stunning fashion. Queen Victoria is overjoyed, while Prince Albert remains glued to the stage rail throughout the race. After the finish, Fergus visits the Ottoman Bank gazebo to receive congratulations from Russell, the only person he has consistently interacted with since his recruitment. Fergus has never met Kellan, not even in the guise of the wealthy Turkish banker who owns the stable. Russell hands the jockey an extra super-bonus in cash for the incredible victory. The organizers then summon the winner to the royal box to reward him. The Grand Druid, Pasha of the Great Gate, is not present when Russell congratulates Fergus because he is already in the box reserved for English nobles and foreign dignitaries. While no one pays attention to him, Kellan bribes a few stewards to get a woman into the VIP area. One of them takes an extra tip to deliver an invitation to the woman to attend the royal festivities. Caroline is taken aback by the invitation, but she follows the steward and joins the party. A few moments later, Fergus makes his entrance into the VIP box. He is honored and

complimented by all the noble organizers of the competition. He bows before an amazed Queen Victoria, and Prince Albert shakes his hand. But Fergus's attention is fixed entirely on Caroline. As Kellan had predicted, the two find each other immediately attractive. It is their Vikindianess that draws them together. Moreover, Caroline is a rich and attractive woman who loves men who dominate horses. In fact, after all the formalities, Fergus and Caroline spend the rest of the party talking to each other. At the right moment, Kellan approaches them. He is not afraid of being recognized by Caroline because, after the staged death of Aziz Efendi, he made sure to alter the features of his face. Kellan presents himself as the owner of the Ottoman Bank and compliments Fergus with a few brief sentences. As the Pasha—dressed in an English-style tailcoat but wearing a fez—is about to leave, Fergus, in true American fashion, takes his hand. When he shakes it, Fergus notices something metallic beneath that warm skin, and a shiver runs down his spine. But the revelers surround him again, offering champagne, and he soon forgets what happened. A few weeks later, a blurb appears in *The Times* of London announcing the engagement between Fergus and Caroline. After this news, the Grand Druid decides it is time to open an office for his company in America as well. Two Vikindians are getting married, and one of them is a McAllan. Their children could be fascinating subjects. They should be carefully observed. The following year, the Ottoman Bank and its shipping company open their representative offices in Savannah, Georgia. They purchase a huge plantation far from the city, complete with a large manor house. Beneath the main building, Kellan creates his first American Druidic temple. The Druids spread out to hunt for Vikindians and to search for new subjects to initiate into Druidism. In the meantime, they begin traveling

across the United States, inspecting houses and properties in search of particularly flowery ones. By Kellan's express order, the McAllan ranch—the most flowery in the state—is the most carefully spied on.

Set 20

Thanks to the Druids' constant surveillance around the property, Kellan discovers that Fergus has a sister, Johanna, who is studying in Missouri. Fergus, at the height of his fame, is nearly impossible to abduct for questioning; his disappearance would attract far too much publicity for Ottoman Co. and for him. But his sister, an unknown university student, is perhaps an easier target. The Grand Druid prepares a task force of his best men and goes to her. They find her alone, reading a book, stretched out on a deckchair in the garden of her small residence on campus. The garden, bordered by a rather low fence, is surrounded by forest. Kellan and the Druids hide in the vegetation. The girl senses something abnormal, and when the ouroboros whistles, she immediately pulls out her sickle and fends them off. Then the Druids appear, surrounding her with a wall of fire that narrows as they advance with their obsidian daggers drawn. She transforms into a huge grizzly bear and, with her claws, tears through several of them. Each time her claws pierce a Druid's body, he disintegrates instantly. As the circle of fire tightens around her, Johanna transforms into a phoenix and breathes fire on the attackers, who melt away like molten lead when struck. Kellan orders his men to retreat. Then he faces the creature alone. Its fire cannot harm his body. Johanna becomes human again and asks the Druid if he is Kellan, the one who escaped

from Santorini. The Grand Druid smiles and admits that it is indeed him—but Johanna will have no chance to tell anyone. Kellan draws his ouroboro, and Johanna retrieves the sickle that had fallen to the ground. She hurls herself at him and tries to strike, but Kellan dematerializes in a flash and reappears a short distance away. The girl is astonished. The Grand Druid launches himself at her with the armed ouroboro, but the blow is parried by Johanna's scythe. Sparks and flashes burst from the clash of the two metals, yet the Grand Druid is stronger than she is and appears to be gaining the upper hand. Johanna, to gather more strength, transforms herself into a gorilla, but Kellan turns the ground beneath her into quicksand. As she begins to sink, she realizes she has no way, with sheer strength alone, to defeat him. She then transforms into a lynx, leaving her scythe behind and taking a tremendous leap, launching herself at full speed toward the vegetation. Falling to the ground in surprise, Kellan watches her vanish. As the animal clears the fence, he hurls his ouroboro, which at the last moment shifts its trajectory, injuring only one of the feline's hind legs. Johanna will carry a long scar on her right thigh for the rest of her life. The Grand Druid gathers his remaining men and returns to Georgia, satisfied. At last, he has been able to witness firsthand the abilities of a true Vikindian—or rather, of someone who could one day become their leader. He also brings home his first sickle. Now it is clear that only those Vikindians who have awakened to their true power can possess such an object. Fergus, as long as he raced for Ottoman Co., never manifested any special abilities, and no one ever noticed him carrying a sickle. So, despite being a Vikindian, Fergus has not developed his power and therefore does not have one.

Set 21

In 1834, a baby girl named Frances is born into a Vikindian family in Stretford-upon-Avon. The Druids keep watch over the house, as it is the only one in town brimming with flowers. And, according to local rumor, the child's grandmother is even an Indian. Her father is one of the managers of Higgins & Co., a large mining company that operates coal and mineral extraction sites throughout England and the Empire. When, in 1840, the girl reaches six or seven years of age, the Druids realize that her grandmother has contributed to the early awakening of her power. Frances possesses an extraordinary ability: she can transform herself into any kind of girl—blonde and thin with blue eyes, or dark-haired and plump with brown eyes. She can even change the color of her skin. The news is immediately reported to the Grand Druid, who is thunderstruck. It is precisely the kind of power he needs to advance his organization. He decides to take action. He travels to Stretford and orders his men to record every detail of the family's habits, especially those of the old woman. He wants to know when she wakes, what she does during the day, and how she goes to bed at night. Kellan intends to determine the best moment to kill her. The druids report that the family lives upstairs, while the grandmother sleeps in a room on the ground floor. The woman has trouble falling asleep, and so, before going to bed, she drinks an herbal tea of unknown composition that makes her collapse like a stone until the next morning. One night, Kellan materializes in Frances's grandmother's room and uses Johanna's stolen sickle to slit her throat as she lies in bed. He searches for the woman's own sickle but does not find it. Instead,

he notices a gilded wooden box bearing the family crest and the grandmother's name. It is full of jewelry. He decides to take it, both to divert suspicion and to reuse it later. Kellan knows that without her grandmother, the child will slowly lose her powers and that, once she reaches adolescence, she will need a Vikindian instructor to reawaken her abilities and receive her sickle. It is precisely at that moment that Kellan intends to step in. Indeed, a decade later, Frances's parents—through word of mouth—begin searching for a Vikindian tutor to help their daughter bring out her power. The Druids, who vigilantly monitor Vikindian households, learn of this immediately. Thus Kellan himself is the first to appear. Under the false name of Terence, he demonstrates to the Shiffords his supposed Vikindian ability to transform stones into gold, and he shows them that he possesses a sickle. Meanwhile, he has already dispersed hypnotic powder into the air with a gentle draft. Intoxicated by the powder, Frances's parents become convinced that "Terence" is truly a Vikindian and hire him. They could have asked Birgid or their chieftain whether they knew this particular Terence—an obvious negative answer would have exposed Kellan's deception instantly. But they do not. On the contrary, under the influence of the dust, they spread the word that they no longer need a tutor. Months pass, and when Terence realizes he has fully gained the girl's trust, phase two of his kidnapping plan begins. The senior partner of Higgins & Co. is Stuart Higgins, an elderly gentleman with two sons. Ackerley, the eldest, is studying law at Oxford, while Liam, the youngest, is a reckless squanderer of his father's money. Kellan first inks the younger son after spotting him drunk in a dive bar, and later tattoos the father in his office. Through Russell, he secures an appointment with Higgins to finalize a deal for a gold mine, bringing with him

a few nuggets from its supposed production. Of course, the nuggets are nothing more than stones collected from the street minutes before the meeting. When Mr. Higgins is within reach, the Grand Druid imprints his tattoo on the man's arm. At Kellan's instigation, Higgins then proposes—and effectively imposes—on Frances's father that he allow Liam to court his daughter, hoping the boy will come to his senses. Frances's father does not truly agree, but he cannot refuse his employer. Terence reassures him, promising that he will be present at every meeting between the two young people and will act as guardian for the boy as well. Frances's parents calm down. Naturally, Terence does everything possible to make Frances fall in love with Liam. The boy is handsome, swaggering, wealthy, and completely unhinged. For a fifteen-year-old girl who is isolated and has no friends, that is more than enough. Frances takes a shine to Liam. Under Kellan's influence, one day Liam shows up at Frances's house and demands to speak with her parents. He wants to marry her, and he has come to ask for her hand. The parents are opposed. Liam and Frances's parents speak in the living room behind closed doors, but the room contains a small Dionysus' ear—an acoustic conduit that allows one to hear conversations. The conduit leads directly into Terence's room, formerly the grandmother's room. He had hollowed it out himself in the stone walls with his powers, making it open into his quarters so he would never miss any of the family's private discussions. Terence lets Frances into the room, allowing her to witness the most dramatic part of the conversation: the moment her parents firmly reject Liam and send him away. Frances is heartbroken. Days later, Mr. Higgins himself appears at Frances's house. Using the tattoo as a puppeteer's strings, Kellan makes him ask Frances's parents for permission to marry

the girl himself. If the marriage were to take place, Frances's father would become a senior member of the company, finally achieving the dream of a lifetime. Frances's parents, unable to dismiss him rudely and fearing some kind of senile episode, stall and politely indulge him before sending him away. Frances, listening to everything from Kellan's room and guided by his misleading commentary, naturally misunderstands. Now comes the moment when the Grand Druid unveils his deception. Kellan tells Frances that her parents are murderers—that they killed her grandmother by cutting her throat with a sickle. They did it, he claims, because they wanted Frances to lose her powers forever, so they could sell her to Mr. Higgins in exchange for her father's promotion, without ever revealing anything about the Vikindians or their existence. If she had spoken about her nature without her power as proof, everyone would have taken her for a fool. As further proof, Kellan produces her grandmother's jewelry box, which Frances immediately recognizes. The box, now earthy and decrepit, is empty except for a pawnbroker's receipt from Warwick. Terence explains that he found the box buried in the garden by accident—the heavy rains of the previous weeks must have brought it to the surface. He discovered the receipt inside, decided to investigate on his own, and went to the pawnshop. The Jewish owner told him that a decade earlier, a wealthy couple from Stretford had brought him jewelry to sell. The pieces were finely crafted, and the couple earned a handsome sum. They said the money would one day be used for their daughter's wedding. In fact, at that same pawnshop, they had opened a bank book in Frances's name, where they deposited the funds that would become her dowry. The pawnbroker had been struck by the Shiffords' generosity toward their future son-in-law, remarking that such

extravagant dowries were rare even among the middle class. The couple explained that their daughter was to marry a wealthy and much older man. In reality, two Druids had impersonated the Shiffords, performing the scene before the Jew and opening the account. The box, meanwhile, had been kept by Kellan. Suspicious of what he had discovered, Terence had rummaged through Frances's father's papers and found what appeared to be an autopsy report from a London clinic, carried out confidentially on behalf of anonymous clients: the body of a woman named Taigi bore wounds suggesting she had been killed in her sleep with a sharp, curved object, probably made of gold. The official doctor's report, however, stated that Taigi had died of cardiac arrest. Frances—young, inexperienced, and without malice—falls for the tutor's improbable narrative and reads, in shock, the bogus document Terence presents to her. Immediately, her thoughts turn to her grandmother's sickle. She tells Kellan that after the funeral, her parents gave the sickle to a lady, explaining that the woman had been a close friend of her grandmother. Terence insists that it must have been the murder weapon, and that her parents disposed of it so the police would never find it. According to Kellan, there is therefore no doubt: the Shiffords, ever since she was a child, had already decided to sell her to a demented old man in exchange for a higher social position. To achieve their ends, they spared no one—they killed her grandmother, took her jewelry, and isolated their daughter from the rest of the world. Not only that. By staging a fake funeral, the Vikindian men and women managed to make the grandmother's body and the scythe disappear, eliminating all evidence of the crime. In other words, the entire Vikindian community was complicit in her grandmother's murder. Between tears,

Frances asks Terence why her parents—and all Vikindians—are so evil. Terence replies that the Vikindians were not so materialistic or career-driven in Allan's time; their descendants have become corrupted. There is, however, a way out. Terence reveals that he belongs to a Viking organization dedicated to curbing the moral decay of their people, drawing upon the true Druidism the Vikindians have perverted. She will go to London with him, he says, where she will finally meet people who understand her and will become her friends. Frances needs very few words to be convinced, and overnight the two run away from home. Before reaching London, they stop in Warwick, where Frances confirms Terence's claims in person. The Jew tells her that, years earlier, a wealthy couple from Stretford had indeed brought him jewelry to sell, and that he had deposited the proceeds into an account in her name—an account that has grown considerably. However, Frances must present a marriage certificate before she can withdraw the money. He shows her a series of drawings of the jewelry, made by a local artist for insurance purposes. Frances recognizes her grandmother's pieces and becomes fully convinced that everything Terence told her is true. A few days later, the Grand Druid, fanning the flames until the entire building collapses, reduces the Higgins mansion—father and son still inside—to ashes.

5

Chapter 5 - London

Set 1

As instructed by the abbot, Joe and Frog take the first steamer to London. Before leaving, however, Joe telegraphed his cousin Richard Campbell, the son of Uncle Arnold—his mother Caroline's older brother. Joe has never met him, but his mother, who often corresponds with her brother, had told him much about Richard. The Campbells are a family of antiquarians belonging to London's petty nobility, who built a considerable fortune by importing and selling archaeological artifacts that, as the Empire expanded, arrived from the four corners of the globe. In recent decades, they had distinguished themselves through the numerous archaeological expeditions they financed to enrich the collections of the British Museum, the flagship of imperial power. Uncle Arnold, an Oxford scholar of ancient archaeology, had also served as curator of the private archaeological

collections held in castles owned by the royal family. Now an old man, he has retired to a country cottage far from London. Richard, however, remained in the city, followed in his father's footsteps, and became an esteemed Sumerologist, fluent in several Mesopotamian languages. A few years earlier, he had been chosen by Her Majesty to direct the newly founded Victoria and Albert Museum. The artifacts excavated and brought back by Richard are far from ordinary. For example, it was his intuition to excavate at Shush in Iran, based on reports from local shepherds—relayed by Caroline's first husband, who later died in Afghanistan—that the site might be ancient Susa, the former capital of the Persian Empire and possibly the Shushan mentioned in the Book of Esther. After organizing a massive expedition and conducting an extensive excavation at his own expense, Richard returned to London with extraordinary finds. Among them was the most remarkable of all: the stele containing King Hammurabi's code of laws, the world's first known legal corpus. The stele was given pride of place at the Universal Exhibition of 1851, and the discovery—followed by the publication of the translation of the Hammurabian laws—earned Richard the title of Sir and a knighthood in the Order of the Bath. After meeting his cousin and getting to know him, Joe intends to ask whether it might be possible to meet the Duke of Worcester, since the Duke is also a member of the Order of the Bath, like Richard. Joe's request will be for Richard to arrange an appointment with the Duke when he is at the Order's Club, an exclusive aristocratic haunt in the heart of London, whose access is strictly limited to members.

Set 2

During the journey, Joe has not received a reply from his cousin, but he is not surprised when one of Richard's rather elderly valets arrives in a carriage to collect them in London. The valet informs Joe that he will be meeting Sir Campbell that same evening at the Order of the Bath Club, and that Sir Campbell recommends Joe wear a dark suit. Frog must also dress in a dark suit, though of course he cannot enter the club. The boy will wait in the designated wing for members' assistants and secretaries. The valet will accompany them to the club and present the official invitation to the concierge. He immediately schedules an appointment at their hotel for that evening, but Joe and Frog reply that they have not yet chosen where to stay. The valet then explains that Sir Campbell has already reserved a suite for them at the recently opened Grosvenor Hotel. Joe has read that the Grosvenor is among the most luxurious hotels in the capital, and also one of the most modern: it is one of the very few buildings in London equipped with lifts powered by steam. Why did his cousin choose that hotel? The valet replies that all of London knows Sir Campbell is a super-dandy; he cares deeply about elegance on every occasion and about launching or influencing men's fashion. Such a man could only choose the most chic residence in the Empire for his visiting cousin. The valet shows them to their carriage, loads Joe's trunk and Frog's luggage, and climbs aboard to take them to the Grosvenor. At the appointed time, washed and well dressed, Joe and Frog go down to the hotel lobby, where the valet is already waiting for them. The man drives them to the club on Coventry Street, in the Trocadero building, one of London's most elegant areas.

He shows them the entrance and the reception desk, then says goodbye and leaves.

Set 3

Joe approaches the doorman and presents the invitation. After carefully examining the document, the man calls over a liveried bellboy and whispers something in his ear. The bellboy nods, and the doorman then asks Joe to leave one of his business cards, but Joe has none. The porter hands him stationery, a pen, and an inkwell, urging him to write a message to Sir Campbell. Joe writes an inelegant "Cousin, I have arrived" and gives the note to the bellboy, who places it on a silver tray and disappears inside. A few minutes later, another bellboy returns and tells Joe and Frog to follow him into the antechamber. They enter a baroque room filled with sofas, with the cloakroom off to one side. The bellboy asks them to take a seat. After a few more minutes, a man in his forties enters the room and approaches them with a suspicious air. He is impeccably dressed. The man asks Joe to prove that he is truly his cousin and not an impostor. Joe gives him details about Fergus, Caroline, and both his paternal and maternal grandparents—details only Aunt Caroline's son could know. Once Richard is satisfied that the man before him is indeed his cousin, he greets him warmly and embraces him. Cousin Richard apologizes for his initial mistrust, but this is the first time they have met, and he needed to be certain of Joe's identity. Joe confirms that, before this trip, he had never set foot in Europe. The fact is that, for Joe, those three weeks of sailing needed to travel from America to Europe have always been unbearable. They are three weeks

spent doing nothing but feasting in first class, making trivial conversation with strangers, and trying to pass the time with boring parlour games. Not to mention the days of rough seas, when one stays shut in the cabin with seasickness. After this first voyage, Joe can say he was always right to avoid transatlantic travel. The crossing has been deadly dull. Jokingly, Joe says he is sure that one day someone will invent a flying machine that will allow the ocean to be crossed in just a few hours. When that happens, he will be the first commuter between the Old and the New World. Richard, on the other hand, knows Ethan well; he often hosts him whenever their American cousin is in England for major equestrian events. Richard, not wishing to belittle him, points out that Joe is far from unknown in London or at the club. Many members, as well as numerous aristocrats and high-ranking officers, are familiar with Joe's reputation as an exceptional warhorse trainer, and every racing enthusiast in London knows what McAllan horses can do. Richard expresses his surprise at seeing Joe and asks why he has come to London—and why he came directly to the club looking for him. Why had he not warned him of his arrival? Joe explains that he sent a telegram from Cork, but Richard insists he received nothing. Joe then recounts the story of the valet and the hotel, but Richard continues to deny any involvement. He did not send any valets, nor did he book rooms at the Grosvenor. Laughing, Richard tells them that hotel carriage drivers have become remarkably skilled at snaring tourists the moment they arrive in town. Richard asks Joe who the boy accompanying him is, and why he does not appear to be white. Joe explains who Frog is and where he comes from. He knows Frog cannot enter the club, but the valet—whoever he was—told him there was a wing reserved for members' servants or the servants of their guests. Frog can

wait there. Torn between surprise and amusement, Richard points out that this mysterious valet not only secured them a genuine invitation—without which the security men would have roughed them up the moment they reached the door—but also revealed details known only to club members. Richard offers a hypothesis. It is likely that some of the ship's officers recognized Joe's surname and telegraphed the Grosvenor. Officers on ocean liners are often on the payroll of luxury hotels, promoting their services to first-class passengers. The hotel then instructed the coachman and gave him the description of Joe provided by the officer, who is their accomplice. It would have been easy: an American, red-haired, tall, and powerfully built, traveling with a young boy who is not white. During disembarkation, spotting them among the passengers would not have been difficult. A city carriage driver is almost certain to know the McAllan horses—or at least to have placed a bet on one of Ethan's. Everyone in London knows about the Campbells' connection to the McAllans. Uncle Fergus's exploits on English racecourses are still widely remembered. Moreover, the tabloid press, which circulates among carters, has written extensively about Richard, making him a public figure. It takes very little for a shrewd coachman to find the right hook to persuade a targeted customer. As for the authenticity of the invitation, Richard says there is only one explanation: the club must have a disloyal employee selling documents and other confidential materials intended exclusively for members. He will speak to the president about it as soon as possible.

Set 4

Richard is displeased that Frog cannot come inside and must spend the evening with the secretaries and butlers. Then an idea occurs to him. Inside the club is Professor Hannibal Punicson, a world-renowned ethnographer and pillar of the Royal Society, as well as a member of the Order and of the club. He has just returned to London from a long journey through the Americas. For months, the professor has been gathering field material on the languages spoken by the Amazonian tribes and those of the western plains of North America. He hypothesizes a connection between the two linguistic families. He would therefore be delighted to converse with a Cherokee native speaker. Joe points out to Richard that Frog is the grandson of a chieftain, and that he will soon become a warrior and eventually a chief himself. In short, Frog is a Redskin prince. That is exactly what Richard needed. Frog can enter the club without issue, since the English nobility is obliged to respect—and never challenge—the legitimacy of foreign aristocracy. The incredulous members stare as the three of them enter the club's main hall, especially at the sight of Frog who, despite wearing a dinner jacket, is clearly a Native American. The club director steps forward to stop them and asks for an explanation. Richard explains who his two guests are, and the director immediately goes to confer with the club's president, Admiral Kevlonrock, a retired former chief of the British Navy. The director personally calls the admiral, who is seated at a table playing bridge with three other members. He whispers something in Kevlonrock's ear; the admiral nods, apologizes to his fellow players, and rises to examine the matter himself. He speaks first with Sir Richard and then with Joe.

Finally, he turns to the boy, addresses him in a friendly tone, and gives him a military salute. He invites them all to enter and enjoy the club's amenities. Reassured by the president's demeanor, the other members calm down and return to their activities. Richard leads them to Professor Punicson, whom Joe initially mistakes for one of the diners at Bison—who else could speak Cherokee so fluently? But Professor Punicson looks nothing like anyone Joe saw in Cork that night. Richard introduces them to the professor, who is surrounded by a small crowd of admirers and a large parrot perched beside him. The professor is recounting his American adventures, explaining that he brought the parrot all the way from Brazil. He immediately shows interest in Frog and, amid general curiosity, begins asking him questions about his people and their language. Joe leaves Frog with the group and walks off with his cousin. He asks Richard to introduce him to the Duke of Worcester if the Duke is present tonight. Richard nods: the nobleman is indeed there. The Duke is in the smoking room; since returning from Crimea, he has been smoking cigars one after another. But he is not an easy man to approach. What does Joe want from him? Joe explains that, as the Duke's horse trainer, he would like to take a closer look at the horse the Swedish prince gave him—the one that miraculously survived the charge at Balaklava. Richard knows nothing about this; the Duke has never mentioned such a story at the club. Still, it is worth trying to ask. Richard and Joe reach the smoking room, where the Duke is seated in a leather armchair, leafing through the latest edition of *The Times*. Richard clears his throat to draw the nobleman's attention. He introduces Joe as the son of Fergus McAllan, the legendary jockey who won at Ascot, and the Duke brightens at the memory—he too had attended that race as a child, and it remains one of the most vivid

moments of his youth. Richard adds that Joe is now a renowned warhorse trainer, and that the "McAllan horses" are his own, including the Duke's current mount. Worcester is delighted to meet him in person, as Joe's horses are considered the finest, and his own is no exception. He invites the two men to sit. They begin with casual conversation, discussing horses and the state of modern cavalry, before Joe finally makes his request. From confidential sources, he has heard the story of the charge at Balaklava, the Duke's wounded horse, the mysterious night melody, and the miraculous healing of all the mounts. Joe wishes to verify the truth of this himself. The Duke pales and urges them to speak quietly. The events of that night are a military secret, and both the command in Crimea and the authorities in London forbade anyone from recounting them. For a minister or a general, it is nearly impossible to justify a miracle—or a magical occurrence—before Parliament. Still, Joe is uniquely qualified to determine whether the story is true or merely a collective hallucination, and so the Duke grants him permission to inspect the horse. At the moment, the animal is at the Duke's estate in Ipswich, Suffolk, but on Sunday it will be in London for the grand parade celebrating the victory in the Crimean War. The Duke, mounted on his horse Fable, will command the cavalry troop that survived Balaklava. It will be the most applauded unit in the procession and will halt in front of the imperial box. Queen Victoria will then step down onto the road to present the Gold Medal of the Empire to him and to the other knights of the regiment. The Duke asks Joe to report to Regent's Park on Sunday morning, the parade's starting point. There, Joe will be able to examine the horse closely. Afterwards, he will sit in the grandstand to the right of the royal box, from which he can observe the horse from a broader perspective. The Duke calls an

orderly and instructs him to summon his aide-de-camp. After a short while, the man—a lieutenant—arrives with a folder full of documents and salutes smartly. The Duke orders him to reserve a VIP seat for Joe next to the royal family. Meanwhile, Frog arrives, and Richard asks how things went with the professor. The boy replies that the professor is a man of great wisdom and courage, but he speaks Cherokee very poorly. If he truly wishes to become fluent, he must spend years on the Great Plains, not just a few weeks. To general amusement, the Duke asks who Frog is. Joe explains that he is the grandson of a Native chieftain and a skilled jockey. The Duke then asks Frog to serve as his groom during the parade, holding the horse's reins. His mount is a steam-powered machine accustomed to action and danger, but ill-suited to standing still in formation or moving at a slow pace. A groom skilled with horses would help keep the animal steady and prevent the Duke from looking foolish before His Majesty. Without fully understanding the implications, Frog accepts. The Duke orders his secretary to accompany Frog to the cloakroom, where the wardrobe maid—who also serves as an emergency seamstress—will take the boy's measurements. He will then send them immediately to the military tailor to have a custom uniform made for Frog, which the lieutenant will deliver to the hotel where Joe and Frog are staying. The lieutenant snaps to attention and leaves with the boy. The Duke asks Joe and Richard to excuse his aide's stiffness; he is new and has not yet learned social manners. Suddenly, a commotion erupts in the adjacent room. The professor's parrot, enraged, flies straight at the lieutenant escorting Frog. The bird pecks the soldier violently at the back of the neck and tears at his shirt, ripping off the collar and exposing part of his back. Club attendants rush in to pull the parrot away, but its claws grip with astonishing

force, and its beak strikes with unexpected power. Only when the lieutenant's shirt and jacket are shredded does the parrot release him, dart toward a window, smash through it, and vanish into the night. Strangely, the man's back is uninjured—not covered in scratches, bruises, or the open wounds that such heavy pecking should have caused. The lieutenant gathers what remains of his jacket and shirt to cover himself as best he can. Maintenance workers dismantle the smashed window and replace it with an intact one, while janitors immediately arrive to clean up. The Duke asks his aide, Lieutenant O'Hara, how he is. With military stiffness, O'Hara gets to his feet, gathers his papers, salutes, and says he is fine. The Duke tells him to go to the cloakroom and fetch a new shirt and jacket; they keep military garments there for emergencies. O'Hara then instructs Frog to continue following him so they can complete their tasks. The professor's admirers ask what could have provoked the parrot, and whether it will survive the continental climate of London. The professor reassures them. Parrots are intelligent animals; evidently the bird had grown tired of remaining on its perch, surrounded by curious eyes. It is very likely flying home. Parrots have an extraordinary sense of direction. It will certainly return to the warmth of the special aviary he keeps in the heated orangery of his cottage in Kensington Gardens. When Frog returns, his expression is troubled. As the parrot tore at the soldier's clothing, it exposed part of a tattoo on O'Hara's arm. The lieutenant quickly covered it, but the fragment Frog saw disturbed him: a snake biting the tail of another snake. The professor approaches Frog and, in perfect Cherokee, whispers that he too noticed what Frog noticed. That tattoo, he says, is a sign that enormous danger hangs over them—over Joe, over Frog, over the Duke, and perhaps over all of England. For now,

however, there is nothing to do but keep their eyes wide open. Frog is left unsure whether to be more alarmed by the danger O'Hara seems to represent or more astonished by the professor's sudden mastery of Cherokee, given that only a few hours earlier he had spoken it in a hesitant, broken manner.

Set 5

On Parade Sunday, Joe and Frog rise early to have breakfast and read the latest news in *The Times*. A small article catches Joe's attention: Senator Fergus McAllan has introduced a bill in Congress aimed at transforming the Wyoming territory into a wilderness park governed by the native tribes, and at prohibiting bison hunting by white settlers. Around nine o'clock, Joe—dressed in formal daywear—and Frog—wearing his new cavalry uniform—arrive at Regent's Park, where the various military units participating in the parade are assembling. They search for the Duke and find him busy issuing orders to his men. Lieutenant O'Hara, meanwhile, is watering the horses, personally carrying buckets to each animal. When the Duke spots them, he beckons them closer. Fable immediately recognizes Joe and nudges him affectionately. Joe embraces the horse and holds him for a long moment, feeling the animal's strength and vitality. Then he steps back and inspects its legs with great attention. After a careful examination, and seeing that the time for the parade is drawing near, Joe hands Fable's reins to Frog, bids the Duke farewell, and heads to the guest grandstand, where his cousin Richard is waiting with the other Knights of the Bath. Richard invites him to sit among them. The parade begins, winding its way through London's avenues. Crowds flood the

streets, lining the roadsides to greet the victors with confetti and streamers. Yet most of the applause and cheers are reserved for the heroes of Balaklava. One by one, the various regiments of infantry and artillery march past the royal box, saluted by the Queen and Prince Albert, before returning to their barracks. As the parade nears its end, the Duke's regiment—the final unit—approaches, still about four hundred meters from the royal box. It is the minimum distance required to launch a cavalry charge. Suddenly, from a manhole a hundred meters ahead of the regiment, a tremendous explosion erupts, blowing off the cover and sending up a column of sparks and smoke. From behind the crowd, bursts of firecrackers rain down on the street from both sides, their sharp detonations mimicking a barrage of gunfire. The horses, already unsettled, begin to thrash wildly. Then, even more unexpectedly, a trumpet sounds the charge from somewhere not far away. As if seized by a spell, the horses gather themselves, throw their riders, and surge forward as though they were back on the battlefield. Fable is the first to bolt at full speed. The Duke, caught off guard, is thrown to the ground, but Frog clings to the reins and, with a leap, manages to mount the horse. Chaos erupts. People scream and scatter in every direction. The royal guards form a protective ring around the stage to shield the Queen and the Prince, but their drawn weapons are useless; the horses are charging straight toward the royal box and will collide with it in seconds. There is no time to evacuate the royal family. Frog, astride Fable, fights desperately to halt the horse's run, but the animal does not respond to any command. Realizing he cannot stop the charge alone, Frog looks toward the grandstand and shouts for Joe to intervene. Seeing the catastrophe about to unfold, Joe leaps from the grandstand and positions himself directly in front of

the royal box. He plucks a blade of grass, brings it to his lips, and plays it exactly as Frog taught him. Almost instantly, the horses calm, slow, and come to a halt before the stage. The crowd erupts in applause, surrounding Joe and Frog and lifting them in triumph for saving the royal family. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert request to see the two heroes up close and thank them personally. They are ushered onto the stage, and the Queen sends for the Duke of Worcester, still slightly dazed from his fall. The sovereign draws the officer's sabre from its sheath and immediately bestows upon both Frog and Joe the title of Sir of the Crown. Prince Albert, Grand Master of the Order, then appoints them Knights of the Bath. The royal secretaries and security officers insist that the monarchs leave the site at once, until Scotland Yard secures the area and apprehends the offenders. London will be searched from top to bottom to bring the culprits to justice. The royals depart and climb into their carriage, escorted by a swarm of soldiers with ample cavalry support. Richard approaches Joe and Frog, accompanied by Admiral Kevlonrock, who congratulates them and formally admits them into the club. According to tradition, the club will celebrate the admission of two new members that evening with a banquet of honor. He gives them an appointment for ten o'clock, the hour when the libations begin.

Set 6

When the crowd finally thins, Joe and Frog set off in search of a place to have lunch. As they move away from Regent's Park, the number of people dwindles until they reach Hyde Park, which is nearly deserted. Only a handful of speakers are addressing a

sparse audience at Speaker's Corner. They ask a few bystanders if they know of a decent place to eat, and someone directs them to a pub on the far side of the park. They follow an alley that becomes a footpath and eventually leads into a wooded area. As they walk, a loud snort sounds behind them. They turn and see a massive stag with enormous antlers glaring at them with unmistakable fury. Joe and Frog have no idea why. They try to calm the animal, but it is useless. The deer charges, and they run. They burst out of the woods with the stag still in pursuit. The animal shows no sign of giving up, and they have no idea how to shake it off. They spot a small London park-keeper's cottage with an onion-shaped dome, and Frog urges Joe to follow him. When they reach it, Frog makes a spectacular leap, lands on the dome, and extends his hand to Joe just as the deer lunges to bite him. Joe climbs up, and together they watch the stag from above. The animal rams the cottage repeatedly, as if trying to knock it over, seemingly intent on toppling it. Then a distant voice echoes through the trees. The stag freezes, startled, and bolts back into the forest. Joe and Frog climb down and notice a broken piece of antler lying where the deer had been striking. The fragment is embedded in a playbill for a Shakespeare production premiering the next day at the Globe Theatre. In one corner, pasted over the edge, is an advertisement for an American grill located beside the theater. Joe jokes about Frog's hatred of Shakespeare, and, since he is craving a properly cooked grilled steak, they decide to head there.

Set 7

When they arrive at the theatre, they are disappointed to find the grill closed. They ask a passer-by whether it will open later, but he explains that the owners—Americans, but observant Quakers—do not work on Sundays. They are about to leave when they notice that one of the theatre's side doors is ajar, and from within comes the voice of an actor reciting verses. Frog recognizes the passage; he learned it at school. Joe urges him to come along and watch the rehearsal, to see Shakespeare performed by a professional. The theatre is deserted. Scaffolding in several places suggests that renovation work is underway. Onstage, a lone actor is reciting Hamlet's famous soliloquy while holding a strange skull—one whose upper portion appears to have been cut clean off. Joe and Frog freeze in astonishment. The man is one of the guests from the dinner at the Bison. They sit quietly and listen to his recitation. The actor notices the two figures in the audience. He stops, calls them to the stage, and reveals the skull in his hand. Painted on the back of it is the same symbol that Lieutenant O'Hara bears tattooed on his arm. The actor asks Joe and Frog—still stunned by the coincidence—whether they recognize the design. They answer that they do. The actor explains that for several decades the Vikindians have known that anyone who bears this symbol is one of Kellan's druids. Joe and Frog are bewildered. Is he speaking of *that* Kellan—the favourite pupil of Cathbad? Exactly. After plunging into the volcano, Kellan transformed into a ferocious orca. Among all his companions, he alone succeeded in building a network of living orcas to serve him, making him even more deadly. Allan and his warriors and shamans imprisoned him

inside the volcano on the island of Santorini, under the vigilant protection of the seals. By 1761, however, the ruthless hunting of seals in the Mediterranean meant that there were no longer enough of them to keep the prisoner under guard. The horn proved useless as well; it could do little against the relentless slaughter of the animals. When the number of seals fell below the minimum threshold, Santorini was shaken by a volcanic eruption. The eruption was not especially violent, though it did create a new island, later named New Caldera. At first, the islanders were not overly concerned. Panic set in only when they realized that Kellan had managed to free himself. Since then, the Vikindians have been searching for him. They do not know what form he currently takes or where he is hiding, but they do know that he has trained new druids by passing on part of his power. These druids hunt Vikindians, and any Vikindian who falls into their hands is doomed. They vanish without leaving a trace. Frog then asks how the Vikindians can defend themselves against enemies with such extraordinary abilities. The actor explains that the Vikindians possess powers as well, though of a different nature. Each Vikindian is born with an innate individual power. These powers vary from person to person; parents and children do not share the same abilities. What is hereditary is the *presence* of a power, not its type. Joe points out that he is technically the son of two Vikindians. Could he have a power he has never realized he possessed? The actor answers yes, but adds that discovering and cultivating one's power is not simple. To uncover what it is and how to awaken it, one must be guided by a master—someone who can place the apprentice in a series of carefully designed situations that trigger the emergence of the power. Joe understands why, at home, neither his parents nor his brother have ever done

anything unusual or displayed supernatural powers. Evidently, they, like him, have never developed their powers. The actor tells them to pay attention to the health of plants, because in the presence of Vikindians the plants around them are always unusually lush. It is a secondary ability all Vikindians possess, independent of the level of development of their personal power. Joe is stunned. This is a detail he had never once noticed in his entire life. He believed that the greenness of their ranch was solely due to his mother's skill, and that the abundance of beautiful, robust, lush plants in their Washington house was a reflection of his father's refined taste. The actor adds that once a Vikindian has awakened and mastered his power, he receives a gift from the oldest Druids: a pocket-sized golden sickle that he must always carry with him. Each sickle bears a unique decoration on its handle, personalized for its owner. Frog asks who forges these sickles and where the gold is mined, but the actor replies that such matters are confidential. Only the Vikindian leaders know the answer. The sickle is not only a weapon of defense; through it, a Vikindian can momentarily transmit his power to another Vikindian—or, under certain conditions, to several of them. This is their collective power. As the actor displays his own sickle, Joe confirms that he has never seen anything like it in his home. Joe then asks what the man's power is. In response, the actor vanishes in a sudden cloud of steam. His clothes, wig, and the skull drop to the floor. Joe and Frog wait for him to reappear, but even after twenty minutes, no one returns. A copy of *Hamlet* lies on the stage, with a note on the cover indicating the date of the dress rehearsal: 3 p.m. the following day. Joe and Frog would have liked to ask why the skull was missing its scalp, but the actor gave them no time. They decide to take the skull with the symbol so the

professor can examine it, planning to return it to the actor during the rehearsal. After leaving the theatre, it is too late for a proper meal, so they stop for ice cream on their way back to the hotel. Joe and Frog arrive early at the club. Many guests have yet to appear, and the dining room is still being prepared. Both wear black gala suits, the sash of their new order draped over their shoulders. Since it is too early for the banquet, they go in search of the professor to show him the skull marked with the symbol.

Set 8

Professor Punicson, surrounded by admirers and overwhelmed with questions, does not deny their request. When he sees what they are carrying, he dismisses the crowd with a polite gesture and leads Joe and Frog aside. His expression changes. He tells them plainly that he, too, is Vikindian—and that he knows they have been to the Globe. If they are holding that skull, it means they have taken a step deeper into the truth of Kellan's Druids. That alone grants him permission to reveal something both extraordinary and terrifying. Punicson accompanies them into the library, seats them on a small sofa, and opens a drawer beneath the shelves. The professor returns holding a black metal object forged in the shape of the Celtic symbol. This ouroboros is similar to the one painted on the skull, but not identical. In fact, although the snake heads still bite the tail of the one before them, they look outward rather than forward. The professor asks them to be careful. Punicson begins to shake the object, and suddenly the two snake heads flash their eyes, which light up red. Then, even more abruptly, sharp blades emerge from

their mouths. The professor throws it against the wall, toward a large stuffed elk head. The ouroboros cleanly slices off one of the trophy's horns and then returns to the professor's hands. Joe is impressed by the surgical precision of the cut, while Frog remarks that he is surprised the object naturally returned to the hand of the one who threw it. Since the two of them set off unarmed on their journey, such a weapon would be useful should they encounter any druids. They ask the professor if they can borrow one. Punicson, however, explains that this is the only ouroboros specimen they possess, and that managing it requires long and exhausting training. It cannot be entrusted lightly to anyone. He recovered it from the Globe itself, where one of the druids had attempted to kill England's Vikindian chieftain — the very actor they had spoken to. This is why the professor senses the impending danger as so grave: Kellan intends to free his master and his allies in order to eradicate the Vikindians and the American Indians from the planet. Joe shudders at the thought of five huge volcanoes erupting simultaneously. The consequences would bring death and the extinction of most living species — humanity included. That is why the horn must be found, and that is why Kellan must be stopped. The shocking talk is interrupted by the call for dinner. They sit at the table next to the Duke, who shares with them Scotland Yard's preliminary findings about the attack on the royal family. Investigators discovered strong doses of stimulants in the water the horses drank before the parade. And, unsurprisingly, Lieutenant O'Hara—now vanished—had been in charge of watering them. Of his accomplices, there is no trace. Joe asks how O'Hara ever became the Duke's aide-de-camp, and the Duke explains that his previous aide died in a strange accident. The replacement was assigned directly by the recruiting office.

Set 9

The following day, Richard takes them to the Victoria and Albert Museum to visit the section dedicated to Vikings, Celts, and American Indians. The highlight of the collection is a golden sickle embedded in a wooden trunk. The trunk has been carefully sectioned so that the sickle can be displayed without removing it. Richard explains that there are several such exhibits, but scholars have never been able to explain how the sickles ended up lodged inside the logs. Joe asks him to explain what is known about the Druids. According to ancient writers, Druids fell into two principal categories: the Druids of the Earth, who kept earthly forces at bay and the Druids of the Stars, who protected against the tricks of fate commanded by the heavens. The Druids of the Earth understood the Forces of Nature. They were the ones who erected stone circles, menhirs, and dolmens. According to their belief, these forces were intelligent waves of plasma moving beneath the earth's crust. By learning to control them, the Druids could prevent earthquakes and natural disasters, but also influence wind, rain, and atmospheric phenomena. Legend says these forces were vibrations, sensitive to music. Standing in the right place at the right time, surrounded by stones, and playing the correct melody on a metal flute, the Druids of the Earth could make these forces benevolent toward the lands and peoples who knew how to communicate with them. The success of harvests—and therefore the survival of many northern peoples—depended on this. The Druids of the Stars, instead, were connected to the Forces of Heaven. By communicating with animals and attuning themselves to plants, they could identify the best hunting and fishing grounds, the

most fertile soils, and the richest water sources. They used plant-based preparations to foresee the outcome of an enterprise or the dangers looming over human beings. Their gatherings did not take place among stones but in the heart of nature, beneath vast, ancient trees. All Druids met together only once a year. On the night of 24 June, St. John's Night, they gathered in Lagrange, Ireland, for a plenary session and a joint ritual to promote fertility and abundance. Frog asks whether shamans from America also attended these meetings. Richard smiles and replies that Europeans had not reached the New World before Columbus, and Native Americans never possessed ships capable of crossing the ocean. With a sardonic laugh, he adds that the only ones who might have brought them were the Vikings—who, however, never sailed beyond Iceland. In short, Richard seems to know nothing about the Vikindians.

Set 10

Joe and Frog reach the Globe a little after three. The familiar side door is open again, and they slip inside. This time the theatre is alive: sets assembled, props scattered, actors already in costume. At the center of the stage stands the very actor who had vanished before their eyes the day before, now delivering lines as if nothing unusual had ever happened. They sit quietly and watch the rehearsal for a while. When the director finally calls for a short break, the actors disperse, stretching or sipping water. The man from the Bison dinner steps down from the stage and walks toward them, settling into the row just in front of them. Joe and Frog hand him the skull. He thanks them with a nod, turning it over in his hands as if checking that nothing

has been disturbed. Then he begins to speak, his voice low enough not to carry beyond their row. He tells them the story of the attempt on his life. It had happened a few months earlier. The company had been preparing a staging of *Hamlet* for some time, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra providing the accompaniment. Rehearsals were often grueling, especially those involving the musicians—among them a young woman who served as the second flute soloist. She had many passages in the score, and whenever her turn came, all eyes and ears were drawn to her, for her playing was nothing short of divine. The day of the premiere arrived, and the first flutist failed to appear at the theatre. She had suffered an accident the night before and was unable to perform. The Philharmonic asked the young second flutist to take her place, and she agreed. The play went on, with the actor performing Hamlet and the girl now serving as first flute. During the monologue, while he was reciting, the flutist accompanied him with a soft, haunting melody. When the music faded—as scripted—the actor lifted his gaze toward the audience for a brief moment. At that instant, he saw the flutist lowering her instrument and preparing to hurl an ouroboros. As she raised her arm, her sleeve slipped back, revealing the Druidic tattoo on her forearm. The actor threw himself to the ground just in time, dodging the spinning weapon and deflecting its trajectory with the stage skull. The blade sliced cleanly through the upper portion of the calvaria. Diverted from its intended path, the rotating object lodged itself in the stage set, unable to return. The flautist had sprinted offstage, invoking the power of heat to ignite a sudden, violent blaze. The fire served both as a smokescreen for her escape and as a deadly trap for him; the thick smoke could easily have choked him unconscious before anyone realized what was happening. The ensuing commotion—

musicians shouting, actors fleeing, stagehands rushing for buckets—gave her all the time she needed to vanish. No one ever found her trail again. The recovered ouroboros was entrusted to Professor Punicson for study. It was the professor's idea to paint an ouroboros on the skull whose calvaria had been sliced away. Among Vikindians in England, anyone familiar with the story of the attack immediately recognizes the bearer of the theatrical skull as the envoy of the chieftain of the Vikindian tribe of the British Isles. That is why Punicson had spoken to Joe and Frog without reservation: the skull itself was a credential. Joe and Frog would have liked to ask the actor how he knew what had happened at the club, and more about the Bison in Cork, but the break ends abruptly. The director calls the actors back to their marks, and the man rises, slipping seamlessly once more into Hamlet's shadowed world, leaving their questions hanging in the dim air of the theatre. As he takes his leave, the actor tells them that the flautist may well be the same English girl who calls herself Frances—the one who appeared in Florence a few weeks earlier. The timing matches perfectly. The real problem is that no one knows what the girl actually looks like. Frances, he explains, is not only a druid but also a Vikindian. She disappeared when she was only fifteen, most likely because she had fallen in love with her tutor, who vanished with her. That tutor may have been a druid... or Kellan himself. No one knows what power the girl possesses. Based on her parents' memories, it may be that she always appears different to each person who looks at her. That would explain why no two witnesses describe her the same way, and why Scotland Yard has been unable to produce even a single reliable sketch. The druids, however, seem to rely on her for two reasons: she can read the Cherokee language of the manuscript stolen in Cork, and she can play

the golden horn. To recover the codex and locate the horn, Joe and Frog must pack their bags and leave for Italy that very night. They must find Frances and discover what she knows. Joe and Frog ask how they are supposed to recognize a girl who never looks the same twice. The actor only shrugs. There is no description. Those who saw her at the theatre remember her differently, each insisting on details that contradict the others. That is why the task falls to them. Before he returns to the stage, they ask whether they can attend the performance. He tells them that every ticket has already been sold—and, in any case, there is no time to lose. Cathbad is close to breaking free, and the volcano is on the verge of erupting. Still, he presses something into Frog's hands: his personal script of *Hamlet*. Frog thanks him and asks his name. He replies, simply, Henry Bless, then steps back onto the stage as the director calls the actors to their places.

Set 11

In the evening, at the docks of London Harbour, Richard is waiting to bid them farewell. As a sailor loads their luggage onto the steamer, Joe and Frog say goodbye to their companion and brother-in-arms. Richard hands Joe one of his business cards; he is known by many people across Europe, and the card may prove useful. They thank him for everything he has done for them. In parting, Joe and Frog confess their regret at not being able to attend *Hamlet* at the Globe that night. Richard has heard about the event as well, and apparently the cast is exceptional. They confirm that they saw the actors during rehearsal and mention that they met the lead actor, Henry Bless. Richard looks

at them with surprise. They must be mistaken—or deceived. Henry Bless, he explains, was indeed one of the greatest Hamlet performers of all time, and his interpretations at the Globe were legendary. But Bless could not have been at the rehearsal, nor could he be on stage tonight. Bless died several months earlier in the fire that broke out during a performance of *Hamlet*, a blaze that destroyed part of the stage and the orchestra pit. After extensive renovations, the theatre is reopening to the public that very evening. The newspapers, reporting on the fire and Bless's death, quoted several eyewitnesses who claimed that a woman had started the blaze. Scotland Yard dismissed these accounts as panic-induced confusion, insisting that a broken lamp or a nearly spent candle—combined with the old, dry wood of the theatre—had caused the fire. Despite the public's wish to hold Bless's funeral at St. Paul's, the family insisted on a strictly private ceremony, exactly as Bless would have wanted. His life had been public; his death, they said, should remain his own.

6

Chapter 6 - Florence

Set 1

Frances enters a small villa not far from the English Cemetery and the Ottoman Co. compound, where the consulate of the Ottoman Empire is located. The consul is a puppet of the Grand Druid. The mansion is extraterritorial, and Kellan uses it to hide some of his dirtier business. In the consul's office, the Grand Druid waits for Frances. She has not seen him since fleeing London. He congratulates her on Bless's murder and asks how the surveillance of the next target is progressing. Frances thanks him and replies that everything is going according to plan. The Grand Druid then shows her the invitation to the concert at the Medici Palace, which he obtained through the consulate. But that is not the only reason he summoned her to Florence. The Grand Druid rings a bell, and O'Hara and Marlowe appear. Frances has not seen them for a long time; she had been told they were on an undercover mission. The

Grand Druid explains that O'Hara and Marlowe have news about something she has never heard of before: the Golden Horn. Marlowe, holding the manuscript stolen in Cork, leafs through it in front of her as he recounts the story. The Grand Druid then informs her that the horn has been missing for approximately sixty years, but it resurfaced last year—first in Crimea, and now it is believed to be in Italy. Frances asks what ever happened on that distant peninsula on the Black Sea, and O'Hara summarizes the story for her. The information being passed to her can be considered verified, because Kellan had witnesses in the field. In fact, one of the Turkish garrisons fighting alongside the Europeans in Crimea was composed of tattooed men led by an officer who was one of his Druids. Several English, French, and Piedmontese officers were Vikindians, and the Turkish garrison had been tasked with liquidating them. However, the attempt failed because of the horn. The sound of that instrument pulverized the ouroboroi and the obsidian swords. Without those weapons, there is no chance of overcoming the Vikindians' powers and killing them. Kellan had therefore dispatched Marlowe to Cork—where the horn had originally been kept—with orders to infiltrate the monastery and gather additional information about the instrument. At the same time, he arranged for O'Hara to serve as aide-de-camp to the Duke of Worchester, who had been in Crimea and had witnessed, and benefited from, the miracle. The Duke himself is not Vikindian, but several of his friends are. In short, the missions of the two Druids revealed extraordinary information. Frances asks why the Grand Druid believes the horn is now in Italy. Kellan replies that the horn was not actually blown that night in Crimea to heal the English horses or save the Vikindians from the ouroboros. In reality, it was played near the

Italian camp for the benefit of the Piedmontese field hospital, which stood not far from the battlefield where the wounded horses lay. Typhus had decimated the Piedmontese contingent, and dysentery had left most of the Italian soldiers unfit for duty. The worst part was that those men were on the brink of death, which would have rendered Piedmont's participation in the war tragically pointless. Yet Turin had decided to send its soldiers to Crimea to revive its aspirations of dominance over the Italian peninsula, and it could not afford to miss the opportunity to sit as an equal at the diplomatic table with the major European powers. Financing that military mission had brought Piedmont's finances to their knees. Without victory—and without being part of that victory—the state's finances would never have recovered, pushing the kingdom toward bankruptcy and inviting France to annex it. Thanks to the horn, the Piedmontese soldiers were back on their feet within days and took part in all the most important battles, earning immense honor. The prestige Piedmont gained from that victorious military feat allowed the small state to conquer Lombardy and central Italy, and now it is preparing to invade the south of the peninsula. Doesn't that seem sufficient reason, he asks her, to begin the hunt for the horn directly from Italy? Frances agrees. Kellan shows Frances the melodic section of the manuscript. He tells her that he can read runes but does not know Cherokee, so he cannot understand what is written there and therefore cannot retrieve the melody. Frances, however, can read runes, speaks Cherokee, and is a musician. She can decode the notes and is able to play them. Her task will be to transcribe the music and learn how to perform it. Then she will teach him both the notes and the technique required to play the instrument. It is precisely that horn—and that melody—that will be their final

weapon against the Vikindians. A weapon that will also avenge the death of Frances's grandmother and the nefarious deeds of her parents. Frances begins to read, but she says the Cherokee is very old, and that translating the runes and extracting the melody will take her some time. According to her understanding, however, there is no hurry, since no one yet knows where the horn is or who possesses it. Kellan then reveals that he actually has a solid lead to follow. O'Hara, in London, has identified many Vikindians among the Knights of the Bath, of which the Duke is also a member. Last Sunday, during an official parade in the presence of the royals, O'Hara and several London Druids had been tasked with eliminating some of those bastards. The plan was to collapse the authorities' platform using bolted horses. Many Vikindians were seated there. In the ensuing chaos—trampled by the horses or trapped under the debris—the Vikindians would have been easy targets. As they swarmed the scene, O'Hara and his men were to kill as many as possible. The Druids would not carry ouroboroi or obsidian swords, as those weapons would have made the assassins recognizable. Their orders were to slit the throats of the wounded Vikindians with their own sickles and then vanish into the crowd. But someone got in the way of their plans. A young, red-haired American and an Indian boy stopped the horses and foiled the attack. Despite being the son of Vikindians, the American has no power—or has not yet developed it—leaving him without a sickle for protection. The boy, meanwhile, is only a "savage," even though he is the grandson of tribal chiefs. Nevertheless, the Vikindians have instructed the two of them to find the horn. The lineage and substantial financial resources of the white man's father may have contributed to the decision to entrust this unusual pair with recovering the instrument. The two will arrive in Florence

within days. The Druids have been tailing them ever since Marlowe signaled their presence after meeting them in Cork. Each Druid must follow them from afar, allowing them to do their work without causing them any harm. Despite being a pair of simpletons, the strange duo possesses concrete clues that will help them locate the horn. Furthermore, they rely on the global Vikindian network. The Grand Druid summarizes the strategy: we let them find the instrument, and afterward we liquidate them mercilessly. But until then, not a hair on their heads must be harmed. Frances nods and takes her leave.

Set 2

Throughout their journey from London to Tuscany, Frog reads the script of *Hamlet* with Joe's help and begins to appreciate the play, greatly improving his English. When they arrive in Florence, it is February 2, the religious holiday of Candlemas. As they approach the city by carriage, they see people heading to Mass with candles in their hands, and the streets are filled with stalls and vendors. They ask their coachman to take them to a luxury hotel on one of the roads along the Arno River. An English gentleman they met on the ship to Italy had recommended it to them. The man, well-versed in Florence, had not disembarked at Livorno as they did; instead, he continued on to Rome. Passing through Pisa, Joe and Frog discovered that the streets running along the river in both Pisa and Florence are called *Lungarno*, a name that translates to "along the Arno" in English. After checking in at the hotel reception, Frog asks the concierge what celebration is taking place in the city. The clerk explains that Candlemas commemorates the presentation of Jesus in

the Temple. During the liturgy, candles are blessed as symbols of Christ, who is the "light to enlighten the nations." Old Simeon used these words when he saw the child Jesus during his presentation in the Temple of Jerusalem, as required by Jewish law for first-born males. But beyond the religious rituals, the festival also includes secular amusements. In fact, the receptionist hands them two tickets to the racecourse—a gift from the management to distinguished guests. He explains that every year, on this holiday, Count Poniatowski organizes a series of horse races to celebrate the arrival of spring. In Italy, Candlemas marks the end of the winter season. Joe and Frog take their tickets and decide to go straight to the event after changing out of their travel clothes.

Set 3

The racecourse is located outside Florence, though not far from the center, in a green area called *Le Cascine*. According to an English guidebook they picked up at the hotel, the Cascine was originally an agricultural estate owned by Cosimo I de' Medici and created in the mid-1500s. For the Medici family, it served primarily as a hunting park and a farm dedicated to cattle breeding and cheese production. In Italian, the feminine term *cascina* refers to a farm where dairy cows are raised, while *cascino*, the masculine form, denotes a beech-wood ring used to press the curd from which cheese is made. Since Florence expelled the grand dukes and entered the Kingdom of Italy, the Cascine has become a public park similar to London's Hyde Park. From the carriage they hired along the Lungarno, they have themselves taken to the entrance of the racecourse. It is

a wooden structure that runs all around the track. There are several entrances, but their tickets clearly indicate that they are for the VIP area. A valet guides Joe and Frog to a reserved terrace overlooking the track, where they can watch the race apart from the crowd while drinking and eating at a dining table. He escorts them to their seats. Although some tables are already occupied, many remain empty. The table of honor is also unoccupied; Joe and Frog assume it is reserved for the count, his wife, and their guests. The race has not yet begun. The spectators all hold candles in their hands. Florence's cardinal arrives at the center of the track, accompanied by a retinue of canons and altar boys. Horses with their jockeys are also lined up along the track. When everyone at the racecourse has lit their candles, the cardinal blesses them according to tradition, and then proceeds to bless the horses. The crowd applauds. The prelates leave the track, the horses return to the stables, and shortly afterward the cardinal arrives on the terrace and takes his seat at a table with other high-ranking clergy. Many of those present approach him to pay their respects. Joe and Frog observe him carefully and conclude that this cardinal is not the same prelate they saw that night in Cork. Suddenly, a bell begins to ring. It is the final call before the race. People hurry to secure their seats in the grandstands, while the guests take their places at the tables on the terrace. A gentleman dressed in an ascot-style suit and a lady adorned with fur and jewelry are the last to arrive. Joe and Frog assume they are the count and his wife. Behind them follows another wealthy gentleman in an elegant afternoon suit, and the three of them sit at the table of honor. Joe and Frog recognize the second man and the woman as two of the guests who had attended the Bison dinner. The horses have already taken their positions at the starting grid. Moments before the

race begins, the terrace attendants place an inkwell, a pen, and a packet of small sheets of paper on each table. Then the starting bell rings, and the horses set off at a gallop. They have not yet completed half a lap when liveried footmen begin circulating among the tables with a silver platter for guests to place their bets on the winner. Joe studies the horses, writes down the number 9, and then asks the attendant whether he can bet in American dollars—he is still not very familiar with European currencies. The boy replies that, in addition to Piedmontese and Tuscan lire, foreign currencies are also accepted. Joe writes down $10 and hands over the slip. After a close contest at the front of the race, horse number 9 wins. The butler then distributes receipts to the winners. The reward for guessing the winner is ten times the stake. Joe looks at his receipt, which reads $100—a considerable sum. In the United States, you could buy a decent horse for that amount. A new race begins, but the pattern repeats. Joe guesses the winning horse again and earns another $100. In the following race, Joe hesitates over which horse to bet on, but Frog confidently suggests number 21. The horse wins. Murmurs of surprise and admiration ripple through the guests on the terrace. At that moment, the cardinal rises and walks toward their table. He asks in Italian whether they mind if he sits, and—uncertain of their nationality—adds a clarifying gesture. Joe replies in English that he is welcome to join them, but they are Americans and do not speak Italian. The cardinal continues in English. He learned the language during the many years he spent teaching Latin at a Catholic seminary in England. He asks how they manage to identify the winning horse with such confidence. They answer that it is simply luck. The betting boy passes by again, and Joe and Frog lean out to point to a new horse—which also wins. The cardinal is astonished. The

prelate then asks Joe whether he is, by any chance, an expert in racehorses. Joe says no, explaining that he deals only with war horses, though his father was a great riding champion and his family is known for breeding racehorses. This is Joe of the McAllans. The cardinal thinks he has misunderstood and asks whether he is *the* Joe McAllan, famous for training war horses considered the best in America. Joe confirms it. The cardinal tells him he must introduce him to someone and leads him to the table of honor. None of the people seated there introduce themselves; it is the cardinal who, in English, presents Joe. One of the two gentlemen at the table, speaking with a neutral accent, remarks that he is astonished by the bizarre coincidence: both he and the cardinal have been intending for some time to present the pope with a McAllan horse. Ideally a white one, since it will be ridden by the pontiff himself. Everyone knows that Garibaldi is preparing to conquer the Two Sicilies and then annex Rome. Pope Pius IX will never surrender, and he needs the finest warhorse to personally lead the defense of Rome should Garibaldi attempt an attack. The other gentleman, who speaks with a strong Russian accent, asks Joe whether he is the son of Fergus McAllan, who triumphed at Ascot thirty years earlier. Joe confirms it, and the man says he was present that day and had rarely been so thrilled by a horse race. He frequents racecourses across Europe and is familiar with American ones as well. Because of his passion for horses and betting, he has met Joe's brother Ethan more than once—whom he considers one of the best horse bookmakers on either side of the Atlantic. Meanwhile, the steward returns, and those at the table of honor ask Joe which horse they should bet on. Joe looks out, names a number, and the horse wins. The group is astonished. The Russian gentleman proposes to the count that he invite Joe and

Frog to the ballroom party that same evening, to be held in the *Salone delle Feste* of Palazzo Medici Riccardi, where they can discuss business. The Russian in the dinner jacket adds, pointing to the lady, that she is an opera singer and that the evening will include a short concert by her. Yet throughout their time at the table, the lady does not utter a single word. Joe and Frog return to their table, but it is too late to place a bet. The final race is already on the home stretch. As the guests begin to leave after the race, the butler brings the last winnings to the tables. Joe and Frog also rise and head toward the exit. Before leaving, they stop a waiter and ask who had been seated at the table of honor. The waiter, astonished, replies that the table was occupied by Count Poniatowski, the man they had never seen before, his wife Elisa Bonaparte, and Count Demidoff, a Russian nobleman. The latter two had been present at the Bison dinner. They return to the hotel and find a new receptionist on duty. The man asks how they spent the afternoon. They reply that they visited the racecourse and ask him to convey their gratitude to the owner for the excellent idea of providing free tickets to hotel guests. The receptionist answers that the hotel does not offer complimentary tickets for events such as horse races.

Set 4

Joe and Frog arrive at Palazzo Medici fully dressed up. They enter the palace, make their way to the salon, and a valet ushers them inside. All the men and women are dressed in very fine clothes. Some guests chat among themselves, while others dance to the music of an orchestra playing at one end of the hall. The adjoining room—the library hall—features a long

table laden with pastries, canapés, and champagne. Joe and Frog first look around for their hosts. They do not see Poniatowski, but they spot the countess and head in her direction. They greet her, and she says she is pleased to see them—or rather, to see them again. Together, they walk to the library to get a glass of champagne. They stand at the buffet and talk. The countess speaks to Frog in Cherokee, and Frog replies. Joe does not understand a word, but after a while they switch to English. Frog asks the countess whether she is the chieftain of the Italian Vikindian tribe. She corrects him: she is indeed a chieftain, but of the Vikindians of France and Normandy. Just as Demidoff is the chief of those in Russia, Eastern Europeand the Balkans. Her husband, however, is not a Vikindian at all. Joe asks whether there are other Vikindians among the guests, and the countess replies that there are many. Seeing all these elegantly dressed people—and thinking of his own family—Joe remarks that Vikindians rarely fall into disgrace and that, from what he has observed, most of them seem quite well-to-do. The countess nods with a smile. Their vibrational level and the use of their powers make them prosperous, and some belong to the richest aristocracies. Since Allan's time, as Christianity spread across Europe, the Vikindians continued to practice their arts in secret in order to gain goodwill from the Powers of Heaven and Earth—or, to use an Indian term, the favor of the Great Spirit. Ultimately, it is always a matter of reaching new heights of consciousness. In the old continent, the Vikindians could not reveal their powers to anyone, for the clergy would have burned them at the stake as witches or heretics. In America, hidden in forests or on the great plains, no one could see them, so they were free to use their abilities. Even today, Vikindians refrain from displaying their faculties in public, and they regularly

join the Indian tribes in America to practice them and perform leaps of consciousness. Frog asks whether this happens only in North America. The countess smiles and invites them to follow her to the Chapel of the Magi. Once inside, she closes the doors to avoid disturbances. She shows them Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco and points out a man in the background wearing unusual headgear. Frog recognizes it as that of a chieftain, though slightly different from those worn by North American Indians. Countess Bonaparte explains that the man in the fresco was indeed painted as an Indian chief—but not of a North American tribe. He belonged to a tribe of the Amazon in South America. The man in question is none other than Cosimo il Vecchio of the Medici family, the father of the Florentine nation—the man whose vision and exemplary governance allowed Florence to become what it is today. By the way, she adds, do they know that if Garibaldi's enterprise succeeds, Florence may become the new capital of Italy? All this could happen in Florence because Cosimo had dealings with the peoples of the Amazon. Frog asks whether Cosimo was a Vikindian, and the countess nods. His power was the ability to make people agree with one another. The countess explains that just as the Vikings had discovered a northern route to America, around the same time the Celts had discovered, thanks to the trade winds, a southern route to the continent. In fact, the Anatolian Gauls were those Celts who, from north-western Europe, first migrated to the Balkans and then settled in the region around Ankara in the 3rd century BC. The region still bears the name Galatia, and they are the famous Galatians to whom St. Paul writes. These Celts, who dressed in the Byzantine style but spoke a Germanic dialect, were in close contact with the Vikings, their northern brethren. When they heard that the Vikings

had crossed the ocean and discovered new inhabited lands, the Galatians—who had acquired their seafaring knowledge from the Greeks and Turks—sailed westward and reached the coast of Brazil. They disembarked, settled in the region, and, like the Vikings, befriended and mingled both culturally and physically with the local indigenous tribes. Today we know that South American Indians share a similar origin and language with North American natives, indicating a common lineage. In fact, when Allan was in Greenland, there were also Celtic and Amazonian shamans whose powers could be passed on to their descendants in the same way as their northern counterparts. Today, the Vikindian people are the combined descendants of Viking and North American shamans, as well as Celtic and South American shamans. She herself has blood from the Aimoré tribe of Maranhão, in the northern part of present-day Brazil. She learned Cherokee because it is the *lingua franca* the Vikindians use to communicate with one another. They chose this particular language because it is unlike all the others. Verbs dominate it: roughly 75% of Cherokee words are verbs, compared to only about 25% in English. As one Cherokee linguist put it, "It's all in the verbs." Everyone liked the idea at the time, and everyone still likes it today. Joe nods in despair. It is too difficult. He will never learn it. The countess adds that, since she is one of the few people in France who knows Cherokee, she was chosen to be a chieftain. Frog asks who the young man on horseback is in the center of the scene, and the countess explains that he is Lorenzo, grandson of Cosimo, known to all as Lorenzo the Magnificent. Under his leadership, Florence reached the height of its golden age—perhaps the wealthiest and most innovative city in Europe at the time, something comparable to London or Paris today. Frog notes that the headdress Lorenzo wears in the painting,

though disguised as a crown, might actually be an Indian headdress. But the young man in the fresco has very white skin. Bonaparte replies, "In reality, the painter Benozzo Gozzoli took a pictorial liberty by giving Lorenzo milky-white skin, whereas he actually had a darker complexion." Lorenzo was the son of a Medici and an Amazonian princess, whose people are easy to identify because they still wear the same headdress: the Terena of Mato Grosso. Joe says he read in the tourist guide from the hotel that Lorenzo and his brother were victims of an assassination attempt that cost one of them his life. The woman confirms it. The Pazzi family, opposed to mixed marriages between Europeans and Indians, wanted to eliminate the two brothers, whom they considered half-man, half-dog bastards. Giuliano, who had not yet developed his powers, fell under the attackers' blades. But Lorenzo, already a trained Vikindian, drew his sickle and used his newly awakened power: the ability to create multiples of himself. Only one was real flesh and blood; the others were convincing mirages. Lorenzo thus confused his attackers and managed to save himself. Joe asks what the woman's power is. She smiles, and immediately afterward Joe experiences a mental intuition that takes the form of words. Unable to resist the impulse, he exclaims, "The count is coming here." "This is my power," she replies—and at that moment the chapel doors open. It is indeed the count. He tells his wife he has been looking for her because her turn is coming soon, then greets Joe and Frog warmly and apologizes for not arriving earlier. He invites them all to return to the hall because the countess is about to sing. Poniatowski says something to his wife, but she moves her lips without producing a sound. The countess seems to have lost her voice. Her husband exclaims, "Oh no, not again," and says he will send Demidoff to her at

once while he keeps the audience entertained as they settle in for the concert. The Russian arrives, takes the countess by the hand, and leads her to a sofa, where she collapses, exhausted. Joe and Frog, concerned, approach and ask how she is. The woman is recovering, but still voiceless. Demidoff explains that the countess has the power to see the near future—and to show it to others. In other words, she gives the impression of being present, even though she actually lives ten minutes ahead. This power is fairly common among certain southern Vikindians, but what distinguishes the countess—and earned her the title of chieftain—is her ability to use it on command and to share her visions with others. Joe and Frog realize that, at the racecourse, it was she who enabled them to guess all the winners. Demidoff adds that the use of this power has physical consequences because it consumes a great deal of energy. The countess becomes aphasic until she recovers, which sometimes takes only a few minutes and sometimes several days. Joe then asks whether the Vikindians have limitations to their powers. Demidoff answers yes. Using one's individual power does not exhaust everyone, but it does exhaust some. Moreover, not everyone can activate it on command; it typically manifests in moments of need or danger. They then ask Demidoff what his power is, but the Russian nobleman has no time to demonstrate it. The countess has regained her voice and is ready to perform.

Set 5

In the salon, the attendants have arranged several rows of chairs in front of the orchestra, and the guests take their seats to await the concert. The countess approaches the pianist, while

Demidoff sits in the front row beside Poniatowski. Joe and Frog remain standing at the edges of the stalls. The concert begins. After a few arias, during a pause, the countess steps away from center stage to drink some water at the side, then returns toward the pianist. Just as she reaches the piano, she suddenly turns toward the stalls and shouts, "That girl! Stop that girl!" A young woman rises from the audience and pulls out an ouroboros identical to Punicson's. She arms the ouroboros and releases the blades. It all happens in fractions of a second. The countess, now voiceless again, gestures urgently to Demidoff to watch the chandelier above her. Meanwhile, the girl hurls the ouroboros toward the cord holding the chandelier. With a hiss, the weapon reaches the cord and slices it clean through. The chandelier falls. Joe and Frog brace themselves for the impact—the crash of glass, wood, and metal, the cries of pain or death from the countess and some of the musicians. Instead, the chandelier drops with the grace of a feather, landing as if it were made of rags. From a distance, it even looks like cloth. In an attempt to conceal her escape, the girl creates a dense fog in the hall. Chaos erupts: people stand, run, shout, and collide with one another in the confusion. Joe wants to block the girl, but he cannot focus on her amid the mass of bodies shrouded in fog. Frog reaches him and urges him to find the exit. If they reach it quickly, they may intercept her before she leaves the building. Frances pushes past the fleeing guests, who stare in amazement as she slips through the chapel and reaches the staircase leading outside. On the stairway, the stewards are rushing to help those on the upper floors and pay no attention to her as she leaves the building undisturbed. By the time Joe and Frog reach the stairs to the ground floor, it is too late. When they emerge into the street, they see no one. A crowd of onlookers, summoned by the

shouting, is gathering outside. The two do not speak Italian, so they cannot ask whether anyone saw a girl in an evening dress running away. Even if they could, they would still be unable to describe her: Joe remembers her as blonde, medium-haired, with a bun, while Frog insists she was brown-haired, rather tall, and freckled. It is now clear that the girl must be the shape-shifting Frances described by Bless.

Set 6

They decide to split up and search for her separately. For now, the goal is not to capture her. The girl is a skilled warrior with extraordinary powers; whether alone or together, they would be helpless against her and risk annihilation. At this stage, it is wiser simply to discover where she is hiding. They can think about capturing her later. Joe heads south toward the cathedral and Piazza della Signoria, while Frog moves northeast toward Santissima Annunziata and the botanical gardens. Joe finds nothing, but Frog encounters a carriage driver in San Marco who speaks a little English. The man says he saw a woman in an evening dress, as if returning home after a concert. According to him, she was a brunette with short hair and rather stout. She headed toward Borgo Pinti, one of the last districts before reaching the city walls. With his whip, he points Frog in the right direction. Frog reaches Porta a Pinti, but he has not seen Frances—not even from a distance. Suddenly, in the half-shadow of the city gate, he spots the light of a firefly. It is so incredible to see one in winter that Frog instinctively tries to catch it. The firefly vanishes. It reappears farther away, in the fields just outside the walls. Frog follows it. After a while, he

arrives before a small knoll surrounded by tall iron bars. Inside, it appears to be a cemetery. Looking through the bars, Frog sees the firefly drifting among the gravestones. Unsure whether to enter, he hears a noise coming from the top of the mound and crouches to see who it is. It is Frances. She walks toward a gravestone marked with a Celtic cross. Beneath it lies a sandpit. Next to it hangs a bell. Frances rings it. Rising from the whirl of sand, Marlowe materializes. He asks her how things went at the Medici Palace. She replies that the assassination attempt failed. Marlowe retorts that the Grand Druid below will not be pleased to hear it. Reaching the woman had not been easy. For decades, it had been difficult to identify both the actor and the countess as chieftains. Only after becoming the abbot's right-hand man had he been able to discover their identities, since the two maintained a close correspondence with McAllan. He had tried to read the letters, but they were written in Cherokee with runic alphabet and therefore incomprehensible to him. Only the sender's name appeared in Latin characters. That was how they uncovered their names. Frances' failure means the loss of a significant amount of the Druids' research and investigative work. To weaken the Vikindians, one must eliminate their leaders. True, Bless had died in the attack, but she had lost the ouroboros and thus allowed the Vikindians to discover the true instigator of the assault. After this failure, the Vikindians would be even more on guard. He tells Frances to keep a low profile and watch over the cemetery in case the Vikindians discover that the Grand Druid's headquarters lie beneath it. Then Marlowe steps back into the sandpit and disappears, and the whirl of sand seals the entrance to the subterranean stone circle as if it had never opened.

Set 7

Beneath the cemetery, the Grand Druid has gathered his men to witness the regeneration of the meteoric-iron flute piece. Marlowe approaches him and whispers Frances' report into his ear. Unfazed, Kellan instructs him to join the audience, as the ritual is about to begin. Kellan removes the two flute fragments from a case and announces that the time has come to begin reuniting them, in order to summon the combined Dark Forces of Earth and Heaven. Only the proper instrument is missing. He hands O'Hara the metal flute piece and orders him to place it at the center of the megalithic circle. Once the artifact is in position, the Grand Druid raises his own flute and begins to play the melody of the Earth Druids as he approaches the object. With each step, the music charges Kellan with energy, enveloping him in a glowing aura as he reaches the center of the circle. He lifts his arms toward the sky, and immediately a thunderclap tears through the night, striking the center of the cemetery. The vitrified bubble surrounding the megalithic circle fills with energy, which then focuses into a beam that engulfs the Grand Druid. Kellan places his hands on the flute fragment, which vanishes in an orb of light. The object releases a brilliant flash, temporarily blinding those present. When vision returns, the Grand Druid is holding a brand-new half-flute, which he proudly displays. Even the small ouroboros encrusted in it has been restored to its former glory. A roar of applause breaks out. Now only the second flute piece remains to be repaired. The Grand Druid commands O'Hara to go to the consulate and send a telegram to London, instructing Wayne to procure a walrus tooth. The Druids of the Stars crafted their flute from

that material, and it must be replicated precisely. The Inuit sell walrus ivory in Canadian markets, so obtaining one will not be difficult. The tooth must be delivered to Nysiros. Standing at attention, O'Hara replies that he will take care of it. Frog has seen Marlowe materialize from the sand and disappear into the sand. Then he witnessed the thunder and a dazzling light that seemed to filter through the graves and the cracks in the ground. Frances, meanwhile, has vanished into the darkness of the night. Frog decides he has seen enough, so he runs to the hotel, where they had agreed to meet at the end of their search, to tell Joe what happened. He does not realize that, once he has already left the cemetery, a crowd of druids emerges from the sandpit and scatters throughout Florence.

Set 8

The following morning, when they arrive at the cemetery, they find the sandpit but not the bell. The pit is just a normal deposit of sand. The cemetery workers need sand to mix the mortar that surrounds the graves. There are no signs of recent surface disturbances, nor is there any evidence of nearby lightning strikes. The electric shock described by Frog should have left a massive, blackened, scorched crater. Joe has not believed Frog's story from the beginning, and he tells him that perhaps he imagined everything in the excitement of the moment—or could the story still be the effect of the Wanige he drank in Cork? Leaving aside the lightning and beams of light, the hardest thing for him to believe is that Frog saw a firefly in the middle of winter. This is practically impossible, as fireflies only live during the summer. It sounds like a hallucination or a lucid

dream. As the two of them talk before heading toward the exit, a woman dressed entirely in black wanders among the graves. Her face is veiled. She appears to be there to mourn the dead. In reality, Frances is the mourning widow, vigilantly watching Joe and Frog, as well as the entrance to the underground temple. Their presence suggests they know or saw something last night. No one in Florence has ever suspected anything about that cemetery. Perhaps she underestimated them. After leaving the cemetery, Joe and Frog head to Palazzo Medici Riccardi to check for additional details about the girl. The concert hall is in a state of chaos. Cleaners are removing broken glass, smashed furniture, and debris. A police inspector is also on the scene, taking notes in a notebook. The man approaches the two. He speaks English and asks if they were guests at the concert. The two confirm and tell him what they know, omitting the more sensitive details, such as the Vikindians, the woman's ability to change her appearance, and the cemetery. The policeman is baffled because he cannot form a clear picture of the girl, as every guest has provided a different description of her. Joe and Frog save themselves by claiming that they only caught a glimpse of her before the fire and the stampede broke out, so they don't really know what she looks like. For the inspector, it is another dead end. Sketching the woman and putting her image on posters around Florence is not feasible. But the city's prefect was clear: he declared himself willing to proclaim a curfew if he does not find the girl responsible for the havoc. Before leaving, Frog asks him if he knows anything about the countess—whether she is well, and what her current state of health is. The policeman replies that he does not know, but if they are sufficiently in touch with the family, they can go directly to their home and ask them. The residence of the countess and

her husband is called Villa Poniatovsky, and it is located just outside Florence, in Rovezzano, heading south along the road that leads to Valdarno and then Arezzo.

Set 9

When they arrive at the villa by carriage, they find it guarded in plain sight by a platoon of soldiers. The inspector was right to say that the prefect had taken the incident very seriously. The sergeant commanding the squad asks for their credentials. They identify themselves and are then searched. In the meantime, the villa's butler appears. They ask him if it is possible to meet the countess. The butler resists and offers numerous excuses, but it proves futile, as the countess steps out onto a balcony and invites them to come in. The butler leads Joe and Frog into a small Japanese-style tea room, where the countess is sitting on a damask sofa. They ask her how the evening ended. The countess tells them that it was not easy to clear the fog. Even keeping the windows open did not make it dissipate. To get the fog out through the windows, the waiters had to wave many bellows. After the initial panic, the ball guests calmly left the building, and no one was seriously injured—only a few minor bruises. Count Demidoff interrupts their conversation, affectionately greeting the countess upon his arrival. Poniatowski has invited Demidoff for a ride in the villa's park. His friend is already waiting for him at the stables. Demidoff asks if Joe and Frog would like to come as well, and they accept. The countess says she will join them later. Poniatowski, Demidoff, Joe, and Frog are riding around the estate. Poniatowski tells them that he has contacted the Piedmontese government directly to increase

pressure on the prefect, ensuring that the investigation proceeds swiftly and that the perpetrator of this affront is brought to justice. Meanwhile, the Poniatowski and Demidoff residences are heavily guarded by soldiers. The prefecture, suspecting that the countess was the target of the attack, has provided them with an armed escort. Demidoff asks what they were doing the previous night, when they disappeared. Joe tells him what he knows, suggesting that the girl might be the flautist who attempted to assassinate Bless in London. And just as Bless warned them, the girl appears differently to anyone who looks at her. Poniatowski and Demidoff are also confused and disagree about her physical appearance. If it is confirmed that the assailant is the same girl who tried to kill Bless in London, it would mean they are dealing with Frances Shifford, a Vikindian who has gone over to the side of the Druids. Joe continues, saying that Frog believes he saw her enter the English cemetery. The boy recalls seeing Marlowe, the deceitful assistant to the Abbot of Cork, emerge from a sandpit. Frog saw them talking together for a while, and then he disappeared again. Shortly afterward, a huge bolt of lightning struck the cemetery, and a bright light burst out from underneath. However, during their first inspection, they found no trace of lightning, which should have left clear marks on the ground. A wild cry draws their attention. It is the countess, riding toward them at full speed. Reaching the small group, she suddenly stops her horse and joins the conversation. Demidoff asks Joe to repeat the story. The countess knows Frances personally, even though she only saw her as a child, back when grandmother Taigi was still alive. So she *is* in Florence, then. Demidoff and the countess reflect. They realize that the cemetery is circular, like a Druidic dolmen site. The Druids may have hidden one of their temples underneath.

They have never discovered one. The countess convinces her husband that they must dig in the cemetery. Her husband replies that it is impossible, because all the wealthy English families settled in Florence would immediately revolt. They are numerous and wield significant influence. Frog suggests a nighttime visit to the site. Men dressed in dark clothes could dig around the spot he indicated. In the darkness and without making noise, passing guards outside would not notice anything. Her husband, also persuaded by Demidoff's insistence, agrees not to contradict his wife. They make an arrangement for that same evening. The countess and Demidoff will take care of the staff. Poniatowski will have to use his high connections to ensure that the patrol guards do not spoil the plan. Poniatowski proposes sending a message to the commander of the guards, telling him not to pay too much attention if there are strange movements around Porta a Pinti that night. The commander will interpret the unusual request as coming from a nobleman who does not want to be caught in the company of his sweetheart. The count spurs his horse and gallops toward his office to write the message. The countess, wondering why her husband knows the commander of the guards so well, whips her horse and shouts after him, feeling jealous if it is true that he has a mistress at Porta a Pinti.

Set 10

The appointment is scheduled for that very night, near the city gate but outside the walls on the countryside side, to avoid being seen in the glow of the gas lamps. And that night is very dark. Poniatowski, the Countess, and Demidoff are standing beneath

the gate's lamppost, though they remain hidden in the shadows. Frog and Joe make their presence known and eventually reach them. Together they head into the countryside. In the darkness, they turn on a light, and soon another light appears, signaling to them. They approach and join the rest of the group. The five members of the group are Slavs, and with Demidoff and Poniatowski they speak in Russian. With the countess, they speak in Cherokee. In the darkness, noises emerge, and four Italian men appear to confer with the Countess. They too speak in Cherokee. The plan is explained. Frog, along with four Russians armed with shovels, will enter the cemetery and attempt to dig at the sandpit. The other Russian and the Italians will surround the cemetery in case the Druids appear or come out en masse. If there is any sign of battle, they will emerge and counterattack with their powers, either directly or by passage. Joe will guard the cemetery gate. If someone comes snooping, he can pretend to be an Englishman who has arrived at the cemetery at a late hour. Before starting, the Countess and Demidoff take out their golden sickles. The others follow suit, except for Joe and Frog, who do not have golden sickles and instead gaze admiringly at Count Poniatowski. What used to be his walking stick turns out to be a sword case. Seeing their curiosity, the count explains that a Japanese master swordsmith forged this special katana. The katana's unique steel composition conceals its secret sharpening technique. Diamonds line the case, sharpening the blade and electrically charging it as the sword enters and exits. Only the golden sickles—or their own weapons—can pierce Druids. However, this sword, which only the count possesses, is the only other weapon capable of piercing them and leaving permanent damage, though without the power to disrupt them as the sickle can. After working out the final

details of the plan, Frog's team enters the cemetery and heads toward the spot where they must dig. Joe stops at the entrance, closes the gate, and steps into the semidarkness. Frances, meanwhile, crouched in the darkness behind a gravestone, observes the scene. The Indian boy is leading a squad of men to the sandpit, which serves as the gateway to the temple. But it is only a waste of time. To reach the dolmen hall, they would have to dig through the entire height of the hill and beyond, and the town guard patrol would likely intercept them before they could make any significant progress. Moreover, picks and shovels cannot penetrate the final layer of vitrified earth. Frances considers letting them dig, but she notices strange movements outside the cemetery and hears whispers coming from the dark surroundings of the graveyard. Frances realizes that the men digging are not alone, and that the Vikindians have encircled the cemetery. They must have understood that something is hidden there. They have come to launch an attack, forcing Frances to engage in combat. Frances rises from her hiding place. She carries the bell and begins ringing it loudly. As soon as Joe, Frog, the Russians, and the others nearby hear the peal, they realize the Druids have discovered them. A black blanket of clouds gathers over the cemetery. Then a powerful wind, almost like a tornado, surrounds the cemetery and begins to hurl red sand, clogging the airways and reducing visibility to almost zero. Everyone takes cover, including Joe. The noise of the wind is deafening, and the sand prevents them from seeing anything. Joe is behind a tree; he has covered his face with a handkerchief, but he knows he cannot hold out much longer. He shuts his eyes to prolong his resistance, but the countess approaches him with a Vikindian at her side. She shouts that the man has the power to bring ropes to life. He

carries one with him, which he immediately manipulates to stiffen and stretch within the cyclone. Joe will grab the rope and try to move forward, pushing against the wind to reach the woman. Joe makes a noose at the lower end of the rope—the only part that has remained loose. If the opportunity presents itself, he will use the rope as if it were a lasso to catch Frances. Joe gathers his courage, steps out from behind the tree, and begins pulling himself forward, inch by inch along the rope. He holds the lasso in his hand, and as he advances, the rope gradually becomes loose again. When he reaches the eye of the storm, the wind and sand subside. Joe clearly sees the girl from the night before, exactly as he remembered her. He calls her by name, and she freezes in surprise. The storm stops, and immediately Joe's lasso traps her. Since the wind has died down, the Vikindians can approach the cemetery's perimeter. Joe, waiting for reinforcements, tries to speak to the girl, but suddenly ten human shapes materialize from the sandpit. Among them, Joe recognizes O'Hara, the duke's lieutenant, and Marlowe, whom he had met at the monastery. They lead the armed squad ready to assault Joe and free the girl. With an ouroboros, they cut the rope holding Frances prisoner. As soon as she is free, she draws her ouroboros. Instinct would tell her to kill Joe—now an easy target—but the orders are clear: Joe and the boy must stay alive to continue the search and find the horn. Fearing for Joe's life, the Vikindians try to climb back up the hill, only to have an ouroboros rain down on them. The Vikindians avoid the threat by combining their powers with their sickles. They magnetize themselves with a positive charge, so the ouroboroi are repelled by the opposite polarity and change trajectory. The ouroboroi return to the hands of their throwers, who unsheathe their obsidian daggers and engage

in hand-to-hand combat. Frances hurls her ouroboros at the countess, but the countess has already foreseen the move and steps aside, causing the ouroboros to miss and lodge itself in a tombstone. Meanwhile, the ouroboros thrown by Marlowe at Demidoff turns into a ragged donut. Poniatowski and the Vikindians with him pulverize several druids. Marlowe and O'Hara unleash a lightning storm on the cemetery, igniting the scattered cypress trees. The cemetery is transformed into an inferno of fire with flaming branches and glowing embers falling everywhere. The burning cemetery lights up Porta a Pinti, and the fire is visible from the houses around it. The lights of the houses start to come on, and someone runs out to see what is happening. Neither the Druids nor the Vikindian want the Florentines to notice them. Frances dumps a heavy rain on the plants, extinguishing the flames. After extinguishing the fire, a Vikindian, possessing the power to return burned materials to their original state, revitalizes the plants. O'Hara and Marlowe, meanwhile, order their druids to retreat, and the survivors, one by one, disappear into the pit. Whatever happens, they have orders not to let things reach the point where Kellan must reveal himself to the enemies. His presence and his appearance must remain inaccessible to the Vikindians. Frances tries to escape by throwing herself down the hill at full speed. However, Joe, from above, makes another lasso with a piece of rope and gets into a throwing position. He knows that it is impossible to catch a moving target from that position, but he tries anyway. The lasso hisses through the air, and Frances, hearing whistling behind her, turns around without paying any more attention to what's in front of her. To avoid the rope that is descending towards her, Frances crashes into a statue that falls on her leg, fracturing it. In the fall, Frances hits her head and loses

consciousness. Everyone catches up to her. The Russian, with power over the ropes, ties her hands, while the Countess cleans the wound with water and her own linen handkerchief. The fracture, to Demidoff—who is bandaging it with the countess's shawl—looks pretty bad. Poniatowski orders the Vikinds to construct a stretcher from the cemetery using two wooden stakes and ropes. The girl needs medical care and must be taken immediately to a safe place where a doctor can examine her. Shouts and the sound of horse hoofbeats emanate from the direction of the city gate. The guards are arriving to investigate the incident. The Vikindians all flee, taking Frances with them, while Poniatowski, pretending to be drunk, uses all his influence to convince the patrol that there is nothing abnormal. It was just him and some good-tempered friends who were enjoying their drunkenness by shooting off a few firecrackers.

Set 11

They take Frances to Villa Poniatovski in Rovezzano. She remains in a coma for a few hours and then regains consciousness. As soon as she wakes up, she finds everyone around her. The Countess, Demidoff, Poniatowski, and Frog are all looking at her at the same time, and yet they see her very differently: tall or short, thin or fat, blond or brunette. Even if they look away from her for a few seconds, when they come back to look at her, they see her differently than before. The only thing that does not change is the color of her skin, which remains white. Joe is confused by these elucubrations. He always sees her the same. He perceives Frances in the same way as he did when he first saw her at the Medici Palace and when he lassoed her

in the English cemetery. Even if he leaves the room for ten minutes, he consistently sees her in the same way. Frances, still a little confused, asks if she is a prisoner. They reply that, technically, she is only their guest. But she is not allowed to leave the villa as she is charged with trying to assassinate the countess. Inside, she is free to roam as she pleases but cannot leave its perimeter. Squads of armed Vikindians regularly patrol the high wall surrounding the property. If the Druids attempted to liberate her, they would find a not-so-friendly welcoming committee waiting for them. Two Vikindians will follow her like a shadow, and they will become her omnipresent guardians. The countess calls in Odette and Teo, two 20-year-old French siblings. She is minute and very quick in her movements, while he is big, and every time someone tries to hit him, he becomes as hard as a rock. Furthermore, if the two siblings grasp each other's hands, they simultaneously wield both powers. It is therefore not simple to get rid of them. Frances tries to get up but feels severe pain in her leg that does not allow her to move. Her leg is heavily bandaged. They explain to her that during the battle at the cemetery, among other bruises, she fractured her leg. The doctor said it is a serious fracture and that it will be difficult for it to heal properly. It is likely that Frances will have to walk with a cane for the rest of her life. The doctor, who is also a Vikindian, administered a powerful anesthetic to set her fracture. That is why she slept so many hours. He has instructed the countess to aid the girl's convalescence by administering Wanige, the best medication to support Frances during the most challenging phases of the infection. Indeed, the wound has left her weak and suffering from a high fever. They hand her a cup, and she takes a sip of Wanige, prepared personally by the countess's Sioux cook. After a few minutes, she falls into a deep sleep. Frances's

forehead temperature seems to drop while she sleeps, but when she wakes up the next morning, her fever rises again and she loses consciousness once more. Joe and Frog care for Frances throughout her convalescence, changing the wet cloths on her forehead, feeding her, and comforting her as the fever remains high for several days. As the days pass, the fever subsides, and Frances begins to recognize people, eat on her own, and become more independent. However, she still cannot get out of bed.

Set 12

A few weeks later, the doctor comes to remove the rigid bandage from the girl's leg. Although the dosage of Wanige has been lowered over the days, the doctor still prescribes that she continue taking a few drops before falling asleep. Wanige not only acts as an anesthetic, but it also has healing properties. The fracture has healed, but her leg still has a large bruise, so the doctor forbids her from trying to walk again. She can, however, go outside on the warmer days of the spring that has just begun, as long as someone helps her into a wheelchair. On the first suitable day for the walk, Joe and Frog put Frances in a wheelchair and take her around the park. Joe is the one pushing. Frog asks her in Cherokee if she speaks his language, to which she replies in somewhat halting Cherokee that she hasn't practiced much since her grandmother's death, but she can still read it, even when it is written in runic. They ask her something about herself. Frances, in English, tells them that her surname is Shifford and that she is originally from Stetford-on-Avon, Shakespeare's hometown. Frog lets out a sigh. She comes from a Vikindian family, which she left when she was

sixteen to join the Druids—or rather, more precisely, to follow the Grand Druid. Does she also have mixed blood? Frances answers yes: her grandmother was from the Appalachians. And does she also have powers? Yes, sighs the girl. Joe asks her to let him guess: no one perceives her appearance the same way. She corrects him, saying, "No one sees me the same way twice. Every time they look at me, it's a different version of who I really am." In some cases, she is able to stabilize her shape for a few hours with considerable effort, but otherwise her changing appearance is continuous. Joe then tells her that, strangely, he always perceives her in the same way, and he describes how he sees her. For the first time, Joe describes the way Frances sees herself in the mirror, which thrills her: could this be Joe's unique ability? It had never occurred to her that someone might see her exactly as she sees her own reflection. They know it is useless to ask her about the Grand Druid, because the tattoo prevents the wearer from revealing anything compromising about him, his plans, or the organization he has built. The Countess and Demidoff have told them that during interrogations, when the Grand Druid is mentioned, it is as if Frances goes blank. Her eyes turn gray, and after a short time she loses consciousness. In the following weeks, Frances's leg deflates, and she begins to stand again, albeit at the cost of severe pain. She limps noticeably, and the doctor points out that, as he had feared from the beginning, the bone has fused badly. It will not break again, but it will hurt her at the point of the weld. For the rest of her life, she will have to limp and rely on a cane for mobility. Given her condition and the need to avoid overstressing her newly healed bone, it will be more practical for her to use horses to get around. Therefore, Frances—along with Joe, Frog, and occasionally the Countess—enjoys long horseback rides. On a hill near the

villa, Marlowe and O'Hara watch through binoculars as Frances rides with Joe and Frog. The girl certainly seems to have made some new friends. The Grand Druid's plan is unfolding exactly as predicted. The Master, having learned of her capture, has ordered that Frances be left in the hands of the Vikindians. The tattoo binds her indissolubly to the Druids, allowing him to know where she is at all times. Moreover, the tattoo blocks her memories, so there is no fear of Frances betraying him. Kellan stated that, since Frances is a Vikindian, her story will likely soften the hearts of those suckers, leading them to befriend her. Once her health improves, they will eventually include her in the hunt for the horn. All that remains is to follow her discreetly from afar. Meanwhile, the Florentine newspapers fill their pages with reports of Garibaldi's expedition, which has just departed. Nothing else occupies conversations in Florence's cultural circles, streets, or squares. Garibaldi also animates the discussions at Villa Poniatowski, where Joe and Frog are now at home and frequently spend their evenings. Frances, watched closely by the two warrior siblings, sits at the table with them and enjoys talking about the shocking events that are changing the face of Italy.

Set 13

One evening in May, while coffee is being served in the garden, they hear a commotion at the villa's entrance. A lady has arrived at the door and urgently asks to speak with the landlords. She is well known to the servants and is immediately let in. After a few minutes, another of the women who had been at the Bison dinner bursts into the garden. The lady, speaking very British English

with a hint of Italian, addresses Joe and Frog, saying she has been looking for them all over Florence. She is Jessie White Mario, the head of the tribe for Italy and Spain, and she is involved in Garibaldi's enterprise as the person responsible for organizing the nursing division of his expedition. She has returned on the first steamer from Palermo to report the news she is about to give. In the battle of Calatafimi, Garibaldi had been badly wounded. The doctors had tried to tamponade the wound as best they could, but it had all been in vain. The general was losing blood, and the bleeding seemed unstoppable. It was feared that he would not make it through the night. Mario, along with other nurses, was tending to an increasingly bloodless Garibaldi when they heard the majestic and sublime melody of the horn, causing the blood to stop flowing from the wound immediately. With each note of the melody, the General gradually regained his color. The next morning he was conscious and had asked to eat. In a couple of days he was on his feet again, and it seemed as if he had only been grazed. Mario left Palermo when Garibaldi was already back on horseback. For security reasons, she could not telegraph the news to Florence, so she came in person. The horn may still be in Sicily. If they want to find it, that is where they must go. They will leave with her the next day. As a result, they must pack immediately because there is no time to lose. Joe, to everyone's surprise, asks to take Frances with them. During these weeks in Florence, Joe has been exchanging letters with his mother, seeking explanations about their Vikindian heritage and why she never disclosed this information to him. In one of these letters, Caroline recounted that the Grand Druid, many years before Joe's birth, had tried to kidnap her and had subsequently clashed with her aunt Johanna. In both cases, one detail stood out: both she and his aunt had noticed that when the Grand Druid is near

a tattooed person, the tattoo begins to pulsate and come alive, as if the snakes were real. Therefore, Frances could be useful in detecting Kellan's proximity, allowing them to anticipate his movements and defend themselves more effectively. Demidoff and Poniatowski disagree. The girl is a dangerous assassin who could escape Joe's or Mario's control. Joe replies that there is no need to worry. Frances is injured, and the only way to restore her leg to its original condition is to blow the horn on benign frequencies. Therefore, it is in Frances's best interest to help them locate the horn and play it to heal herself. Moreover, her powers could be of great help in the search. The Countess agrees with Joe and consults with Mario, who is also in favor, but proposes that Teo and Odette accompany Frances as well. Under the watchful eyes of the Druids, the next day at dawn, Mario, Joe, Frog, Frances, and her two guardian angels leave by stagecoach for Livorno, from where they embark for Palermo.

7

Chapter 7 - Sicily

Set 1

On the two-night, three-day voyage on the steamship, Frances is watched closely by Teo and Odette, although she is free to roam the ship wherever she wants. Mario, on a deck chair, enjoys the May sun. Joe, meanwhile, tries to improve Frog's English by reciting Hamlet from Bless's script, while the boy gives him the first rudiments of the Cherokee language. After dinner, Mario and the bodyguards play cards in the lounge, with Frog trying to learn the game while Joe engages in long conversations with Frances. Although they are sometimes interrupted by the astonished glances or comments of the passengers or the crew members. Each time they see the American with that woman, her clothes are always the same, but her face and appearance are different. Luckily, given the state of war in the Two Sicilies, the steamer is almost deserted, and the crew members are kept to a minimum. During the first evening of the crossing, the sea

is a bit rough, and Joe is not feeling well in his stomach. Frances suggests that they go on deck to get some fresh air. Joe, once in the open air, recovers and asks Frances for some information about her past. They stretch out on two deck chairs, and, gazing at the moonlit sea, Frances begins to narrate.

Set 2

Frances was born in Stratford upon Avon into the wealthy Shifford family. Earnest, the father, is a partner in a large mining company. Margaret, the mother, is sweet and affectionate towards her, but she is very busy with her charity work. Her family is Vikindian, and a strong sense of belonging to this guild is very much felt at home. The Shifford household takes care not to discuss the Vikindian affair with anyone; they don't display any powers in public, and they even conceal the scythes to prevent indiscreet gazes and unsealed mouths from inquiring. Her parents have a near-obsession with secrecy. They have a point, too. Being the only Vikindians in the county, even the slightest mistake would betray them, forcing them to flee. Joe asks if her parents are both English, i.e., white, and she answers yes. Joe replies that she is not half Germanic and half Indian, although she is a Vikindian. Frances retorts that she is not half-breed, but neither is she a pure Celt. In fact, it is her maternal grandmother who is of Indian descent. She had traveled by ship to Southampton from the Americas, specifically the Appalachians, with the intention of joining a Vikindian family to gain experience in Europe. The Vikindian chieftain of England presented her to her paternal great-grandfather, Gerard Wilson, who had hired her as a gardener. The girl

possessed extensive knowledge about plants. Under her watch, every kind of plant grew with particular luxuriance, while the weeds dried up as if by an evil spell. In America, it was she who, for the tribe, was in charge of growing maize, wild squashes, and medicinal plants. The Shiffords' garden, along with their vegetable plot, quickly transformed into a flourishing plantation of flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Grandma's peculiar powers were responsible for the unique goodness of the fruits from her garden. In one hand, she was able to dry up the weeds, and in the other hand, she could make juicy and healthy all fruits, vegetables, flowers, and herbs she grew. Her grandmother's name was Taigi, which means "return of the moon," but everyone in the family called her Tai. She was a dark-skinned woman with straight black hair that testified to her Iroquois origin. However, as a young, slim girl, her beauty had an almost unique feature: two bright blue eyes that seemed to pierce anyone and anything she looked at. The Iroquois refer to those with irises of that color as "Moon-Eyed People," a color so uncommon in her tribe. Those eyes and her free spirit had won over young Philip, Gerard's son, and Frances' grandfather, who, against all the taboos of late 18th-century English society, had married her. Her grandmother's wedding present was a gilded box inlaid with the name Taigi and the Shifford coat of arms. Inside the box were finely crafted jewels that Philip, once discharged from the navy, had brought back from the Caribbean after capturing various pirate ships. His grandfather's power was to sight ships even when they were not visible to the spyglass, so, with him as helmsman, his captain had filled himself with glory and his crew with gold and precious stones. In fact, in those days, as a rule, on patrol ships fighting piracy, half of the spoils of a capture went to the Crown and the

other half was shared by the crew. Out of their marriage, four sons and a daughter, Margaret, were born. Frances' mother had a very different physiology from her grandmother Taigi. She was blonde and very fair-skinned, but they both had one feature in common: blue eyes that could not have been more blue. The same eyes Frances also inherited. Joe, lulled by the ship's rocking, falls into a drowsiness that gradually turns into heavy somnolence. As Frances leaves, she covers Joe with a blanket to prevent him from being chilled.

Set 3

The next day, the steamer makes a technical stop in Naples to refuel with coal. Mario invites everyone to eat at an inn she knows, located in a small square in the city center. It could be risky for her to be seen in the capital of the state attacked by the Garibaldians, of whom she is the head nurse. So she puts on a veil under her hat. They go ashore, and on the streets of Naples, the scugnizzi, the local streetwise boys, notice the strange woman who is Frances. They cover their eyes, then open them again to see Frances with a different appearance each time. The Neapolitan street children begin spreading the word that a foreign witch has arrived in town. Surrounded by the children mocking them, the group arrives at the little restaurant and enters.

Set 4

While eating, both Joe and Frog ask Frances questions about her grandmother, but she is reticent to talk about it. Mario then informs Frances that she is aware of her entire history, that she too knew Taigi, and that she mourned her passing. Frances bursts into tears and recounts that one terrible morning, when she was seven years old, she discovered her grandmother's corpse with her throat slit in bed. At her screams, her parents rush into her grandmother's room and immediately bring her back to her own bedroom, where she is confined until further notice. Frances then stands at the window and watches what happens. Strangely enough, her parents do not go and call the coroner or the police. However, a few hours later, possibly due to a telegraph alert, men arrive with a shipping crate, collect the body, and remove it from the crime scene. The gentleman leading them is someone Frances has never seen before. Frances, in despair over the death of her beloved grandmother, finds herself shaken by what she just witnessed through the window. The parents, on the other hand, seem to have no feelings at all. A few hours pass, and a doctor arrives at the house, drawing up a bogus death certificate stating 'natural cardiac arrest' as the cause of death. A group of women and men from outside the county meticulously clean Grandma's room. They even repaint it in record time. Then, shortly after they leave, a hearse arrives to take away an obviously empty coffin. At the funeral, Frances knows that those present are crying over a wooden box full of nothing. After the funeral, four women come to her house and speak with her parents. After a long chat, the women leave. Outside the window, Frances sees her parents hand one of the

women her grandmother's sickle. She recognizes it because, although the blade is wrapped in woolen cloth, the handle with her grandmother's symbol comes out. Frances does not understand why an object so dear to her grandmother would be given to strangers and is strongly displeased. Mario, knowing the story as a tribal leader, shares with her how things really went with her grandmother. When her parents discovered her grandmother's murder, they immediately assumed that the Grand Druid was the killer, seeking revenge for the trap the Vikindian women had attempted to lure him into. Mario asks Frances if she remembers that her grandmother had come back rather badly injured from one of her trips. Frances nods. Kellan had brutally injured Taigi in Argentina because she was the one to get the closest to killing him. That's why her parents promptly alerted Bless about the incident, and he, in his capacity as a chieftain in England, accompanied other Vikindians to conduct an investigation, assist the Shiffords in organizing the house and paperwork, and collect her grandmother's body for an autopsy before her burial. Her parents' feigned indifference was not indifference at all, but a necessary attitude to cover up their family's secret origin and affiliation. In private, the Shiffords were devastated by the tragedy that had befallen them. Frances would like to ask Mario many questions but remains silent to listen because her thoughts are shrouded in the aura of a new awareness. Jessie Mario proceeds to elucidate the identities of the four women who visited France's home following the funeral. She was also present at the ceremony because she'd known Taigi since she was a teenager. They had developed their powers together and had both obtained their sickles by working and studying in pairs. However, she refrained from visiting the Shifford house, as they had agreed to avoid

attracting excessive attention to their residence. A gathering of too many Vikindians would have caused the Shiffords' garden to overflow with flowers and fruit, jeopardizing their cover. The Shiffords had only permitted four women, each with valid reasons, to visit their house. Birgid McAllan, Joe's cousin and a Vikindian archivist, was among these women. Her investigation into the mysterious disappearances of the Vikindians could potentially link to the grandmother's murder. In both cases, Kellan was either involved or directly responsible. Then there were Auwory and Bonaparte, who were in England to follow Bless to the theater and were present at the funeral because they had met Taigi in Buenos Aires. The two of them had saved her from the Grand Druid's deadly clutches. Unfortunately, the poor Eilleen was not so lucky. But that's another story. The fourth woman was Johanna McAllan, Joe's aunt. It was to her that the Shiffords had given the sickle. They had given it to her because she was close friends with her grandmother, and she no longer had a sickle, precisely because she had lost it in a fight to the death with Kellan. Johanna, out of love for Miss Shifford, regarded the gesture as a great honor for her and accepted it. Mario's words profoundly impact Frances, leading her to gradually acknowledge that the Grand Druid has greatly betrayed her. Not only has that bastard deceived her for years, but he also killed her grandmother. Frances says that she is sorry she thought badly of the family and regrets killing Bless. Mario and the others, still not trusting her, keep quiet about the fact that Bless is well alive.

Set 5

They leave the restaurant, and outside there is an enraged mob with torches and pitchforks shouting to burn the witch. Frances, in order to get rid of the accusers, makes Vesuvius thunder and spews out a few lava stones. The crowd stares worriedly at the volcano. Some shout and run away. Then, as Frances's powers intensify the volcano's threat, Mario steps in to wield her own power. She can destroy the buildings and constructions she focuses on. Therefore, to enhance the credibility of the eruption, Mario detonates a loggia, sections of roofs, and a few semiabandoned warehouses, leading people to mistake this for the effects of earthquakes preceding the eruption. Panic spreads among the crowd. More and more people flee in fear, and more people descend from their houses onto the streets. The assembled crowd hears shouts of 'beware, beware' as a berserk buffalo rushes towards them at full speed. Everyone runs for cover, and the street clears. At that point, Mario uses the other side of his power, which is to rebuild what she has destroyed so that it even looks brand new for a few moments before returning to its original state. As the volcano slowly stops bubbling, the group arrives safely at the embarkation point. Just as the ship leaves port, Frances arranges for Vesuvius to perform a firework display of lapilli and sparks, illuminating the night. Everyone congratulates her on the beautiful spectacle.

Set 6

On the ship, however, Frances is filled with despair at what has happened in the city. Her power has once again turned into a curse, putting everyone in danger. Joe and Frog try to console her by trying to get her to talk. They ask her about her relationship with her grandmother. Her grandmother Taigi, ever since she was in the cradle, loved to tell her stories of the ancient Druids and shamans, how they had met, how they had mingled, and finally the epic struggle against Cathbad and his acolytes. While her parents rarely used the scythe or even carried it around with them for fear that someone would see it, her grandmother made extensive use of it for garden work. The little girl watched her rapt as she pruned or planted plants, and her grandmother told her that one day Frances, too, would have a sickle of her own. Grandma never parted with her sickle, and when she went to sleep, she tucked it away in a hidden, invisible drawer that opened on one side of the wooden framework that supported the mattress. Instead, she kept her wedding present, namely the inlaid box with jewelry inside, in plain sight. Frances would stand for hours listening to her grandmother tell her grandfather's maritime stories and how he had obtained each jewel. It was her grandmother who taught her how to play the flute the Indian way and how to speak Cherokee at a very young age. Then, as an older girl, she learned musical notation from her mother, who played the piano very well. Her grandmother also taught her to read runes while her father instructed her in the Celtic language. Grandma's great inner strength and the strong bond Frances had with her allowed the child to develop her power early on. It was a hoot for Grandma because it was

like having so many granddaughters but still the same Frances. Sometimes, as a joke, they amused themselves by confusing the boys from the milkman's, baker's, and other shops who came to the Shifford house to deliver orders. Frances particularly liked it when her grandmother would pass her power through the sickle to help her tend the garden. They also went together to search for herbs to prepare the Wanige that Grandma needed to rest. This was particularly true every time she had returned from her travels. During the year, her grandmother went away from home two or three times. She packed a small bag, took her sickle, and had herself driven to a port or railway station. On the last occasion, she returned with a severe wound. It looked as if a very sharp sword had struck her in the cut. It was a serious wound but not lethal, so much so that by the time Grandma returned home, the wound was already healing. Now Frances knows where Grandma was coming from and who had hit her. Then her brutal murder occurred. Because of the tragedy, her parents became even more maniacal about privacy and, as a precautionary measure, confined Frances indoors, forbidding her to have any contact with the outside world. After some time without her grandmother, she slowly lost her power. When she was 16, her parents decided it was time to find a tutor to help her develop her power again and become a full-fledged Vikindian. As a result, Mr. Terence Burke installed himself in her house. He was none other than... but the words die in her throat, and her eyes turn gray as she begins to lose lucidity. There's no need for Frances to tell them. Everyone knows the answer: he was Kellan.

Set 7

The others want to know how it continues, but something catches their attention. Frightened sailors run on deck, and when they reach the bow, they point out to sea. They shout that they have entered the Strait of Messina and will therefore have to face the two terrible monsters that haunt it: Scylla and Charybdis. Mario, who understands Italian well, translates what the sailors have said, adding that in reality those two monsters are the two difficult natural obstacles that, in that arm of the sea, are of severe danger to navigation: the strong currents and the thick fog. In fact, a fine mist envelops them as they look around. They also run to look out over the bulwark and discover, to their horror, that the ship is about to enter an enormous whirlpool. The ship gets closer and closer to the vortex. At one point the captain sounds the emergency sirens, and the ship enters the maelstrom. It is huge and slowly engulfs the ship. All seems lost when a gigantic tentacle embraces the ship and slowly pulls it up to safety. When the ship is out of danger, the tentacle retracts into the sea, leaving the boat at a point in the strait that is immersed in a dense fog bank. A sudden magnetic storm drives the compass crazy, rendering navigation blind. No shore can be seen, and there is a risk of ending up on the rocks. The captain is uncertain what to do. The risk of another ship ramming them prevents them from remaining stationary, but continuing would result in a collision with the rocks. The ship slams into something. A reef. The coast is very close. Church bells can be heard from afar. They're crashing. Then, by wetting them, a puff of water draws everyone's attention. A blue whale emerges and starts swimming in a specific direction, splashing with its

tail. The captain orders the helmsman to follow it because the whale only swims in deep water. The captain marvels with them at the weather phenomena at this time of year after the whale rescues them from the fog. They typically occur in autumn or mid-winter, not late spring. Frances, making a huge effort, puts on a dark face and, with all her might, manages to tell the others that those meteorological traps are undoubtedly the work of the... of the.... Then she falls unconscious. A sinister movement begins under her blouse's sleeve. They lift it and see that the tattoo is pulsing with the snakes that seem to move. They all think Kellan is nearby and watching them. In fact, on a promontory overlooking the strait, the Grand Druid, Marlowe, and O'Hara watch the ship and stir up the Dark Forces of Nature to trouble her. Kellan wants to let those morons know that he is breathing down their necks. He is here to pay a visit to his old captive companion and demands that they, particularly Frances, know it.

Set 8

The group arrives in Catania. Off the city's coast, a Garibaldian lookout vessel intercepts their ship. They are told that the port is closed for security reasons, but Mario asserts her credentials, and they are allowed into the city. Mario immediately takes them to the military hospital. Mario gathers the nurses who were with her that night and makes them tell what they remember. Everything matches the tales on the horn: that night, not only Garibaldi miraculously recovered, but also all the other hospitalized patients. So much so that the following morning, many returned to Garibaldi's ranks to fight, and the hospital

remained almost empty. It had to be the horn. A nurse then reports that an elderly Garibaldian is present in one of the hospital wards. He arrived at the hospital lifeless, and the doctors had given him up for dead. Instead, the day after that extraordinary night, he regained his color, started talking again, and asked for something to eat. The very man who was about to leave the hospital revealed to her that he had heard that melody and that sound a few years earlier in Crimea. And given what had also happened there after the melody had been played, he had not been surprised to see that Garibaldi, his comrades, and himself had recovered. Even in the Crimea that night, many wounded soldiers regained their health—not just the English horses! Everybody jump up in their chairs and ask to see the patient. The man recounts that he fought in the Crimea with General Lamarmora's bersaglieri, the Italian riflemen. After the Balaklava battle, he heard the horn in the camp. It sounded identical and played the same tune. Only this time, after hearing it again, he was able to mark the notes. The man, in fact, as a civilian, is a music teacher. Frances would like to see them, but Mario intervenes and takes the paper with the notes. She explains that, for their own safety, shy will not show them to Frances, who is still an enemy prisoner. Where to now? The horn could be anywhere. Mario recommends ascending Mount Etna and searching for Manfreda. She is the jailer of Taranis, the giant condor, and she possesses tremendous knowledge and powers. Manfreda knows Sicily like the back of her hand, and all meaningful news about Vikindians reaches her before anyone else. In this part of the Mediterranean, she learns things even before the chieftains do. She might be the ideal person to help them make the necessary connections. The problem is that Manfreda lives in a rather inaccessible place where one cannot

arrive on horseback. An impenetrable blanket of vegetation conceals and protects her house, keeping curious people at bay. It will not be easy to find her, and it will be even less easy to reach her. Even Mario has never been there, and yet she is the chieftain of this part of the world. So, to climb up the volcano, they need some equipment: flasks, hobnailed boots, and trekking poles. At the city market, there are always stalls selling mountaineering gear to supply the many alpinists who intend to make the ascent to the summit towering over 3,000 meters.

Set 9

A carpet seller, who appears to be Turkish because of his fez and long black moustache, catches Frog's attention as they stroll through the market stalls. He has carpets in a variety of shapes and sizes, one of which is a smaller, almost bedside rug featuring a bison strikingly similar to the one Joe's aunt painted. Frog shows it to Joe. The merchant notices them speaking English and moves closer. In somewhat macaronic English, he begins praising his carpets and pushing them toward the stall. They find him insistent, but he doesn't care; he keeps showing them his merchandise as if they were genuinely interested customers. Trying to discourage him, Joe asks about the one with the bison. The salesman, delighted, shows it to him. Joe asks what kind of carpet it is. The seller claims it is Persian, made in Iran, and that he bought it there in person. Frog replies that he doesn't believe it, because it looks like one of those rugs made by Indigenous women in North America. The seller strongly denies it, but Frog persists, saying he thinks that way of depicting bison is typical of the Keetoowah tribe, who are part of the Cherokee people

despite their peculiar language. The boy even begins to mimic their unique way of speaking. The seller responds to him in Cherokee, rolls up the carpet with the bison, and tells them to follow him into the doorway behind the stall. Inside a dark hallway, the salesman asks if they are looking for Manfreda. They say yes, and he gives them the carpet. He tells them to go to Bronte, a small town about ten kilometers from Catania, and show it to the village seamstress. She is a young woman named Irene who lives in a one-story house overlooking the Monastery of Santa Scolastica in Piazza San Silvestro, the town's main square. They will recognize her because she sews in the street, whether it is summer or winter. She will explain the rest. They leave with the carpet under their arms and rejoin the others, telling them what happened. Meanwhile, Mario has procured the climbing equipment. She stays in town waiting for Garibaldi, who is now arriving with the Redshirts. Frances, with her leg problem, cannot walk much and would find climbing very difficult. Therefore, she will not come either. Only Joe and Frog will go, accompanied by Teo, who will help them. Odette will stay with Frances. As they depart, the Grand Druid and his men observe the scene from afar and, unseen, follow the group.

Set 10

In Bronte, Joe and the others find the seamstress exactly where the pedlar indicated. She is sitting on a chair outside her house, intent on embroidering a white drape. They approach her, show her the carpet, and Frog explains in the Cherokee language who they are and why they want to meet Manfreda. In Cherokee, the woman replies that if they have that carpet, it means someone

trustworthy sent them. And that is enough for her. When Frog translates this to Joe, the woman begins speaking English and introduces herself. Her name is Matilda, and she is Manfreda's daughter. Matilda asks if any of them have a golden sickle and, after Teo's affirmative answer, asks whether they have ever seen a pistachio plant. None of them has. Matilda explains that in Bronte the pistachio grows as a shrub and only rarely becomes a small tree. They will recognize the plant because this year is a harvest year; pistachios bear fruit only every two years. The fruits are a kind of small, red-colored almond that grows in clusters resembling grapes. To reach Manfreda, they must follow the tracks of the pickers who climb Mount Etna. These are paths that can be traveled on horseback, and there is not much climbing involved. The pistachio plant does not grow above 1,000 meters. Frog asks how they will recognize the right path. Matilda replies that it does not matter which one they take. When they reach the maximum altitude for pistachios, all the gatherers' paths merge into a single mule track that ends in front of an impenetrable wall of pistachio bushes. This is the highest point the pickers ever reach. Beyond it, dense vegetation and impassable rocky terrain prevent anyone from going further. A pistachio tree, standing a couple of meters tall, rises above the wall of pistachio shrubs. It is clearly a very old tree, and it has a unique characteristic: it bears fruit all year round and every year. It is impossible to miss. They must lean the sickle against its bark, taking care not to scratch it. The rest will occur accordingly. Matilda asks them to leave the carpet, promising to return it to its owner. Then she falls silent and resumes her embroidery. Joe asks if they should do anything else, but Matilda replies that she has told them everything they need to know to reach her mother and wishes them a pleasant journey.

Set 11

Following Matilda's directions, they depart from Bronte and ascend Mount Etna, arriving at the tree as she had anticipated. Teo rubs his sickle against the tree, and immediately there is a great movement of foliage. Behind the tree, dense vegetation bends and opens, revealing a path of lava rock leading upwards. They take the path that winds through the rocks between two impenetrable walls of vegetation. The path ends in a wide grassy clearing overlooking the volcano's summit, which towers another thousand meters. A two-story farmhouse is situated on one of the shadier sides of the clearing. Manfreda is already there waiting for them. Frog is impressed by the dress Manfreda is wearing. Manfreda wears a multicolored handwoven tunic with touches of purple, green, yellow, red, and carmine. Observing the boy's curiosity, the woman informs Frog that the colors in her yarns originate from local minerals or plants. Just like among the North American tribes, it is from them that Manfreda learned to weave. The mat depicting the bison is her work. Manfreda asks the guests if they are hungry because she has organized a small banquet for them. From the kitchen, wearing an apron, the carpet seller comes out to greet them. Everyone recognizes him immediately, even though he no longer has the heavy brown make-up and the two black handlebar moustaches. The man is Pietro, son of Manfreda. Pietro says that, disguised as a Turkish merchant, he waited for them at the market for days, knowing that sooner or later they would have needed to meet his mother. Joe cannot help but notice that Manfreda is brown-headed and has green eyes, while Pietro has black hair and eyes. They are both different from Matilda, who is instead blonde with

light eyes. Pietro explains that many different peoples settled in Sicily: Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and even the Vikings, who are known as Swabians in those parts. So you find everything in Sicily: from dark-skinned people with black hair and eyes to light-skinned people with blond hair and bright eyes. Between these two extremes lie all the other shades. In their family, the father was Swabian, and his sister Matilda took on all his characteristics. She even inherited his trait of being quiet and reserved. Pietro and his mother, on the other hand, have many traits of their maternal grandfather, who was an Apache. It was among these people that Manfreda learned to weave carpets. Teo asks if the Vikindians of Sicily do like those of Northern Europe, that is, they frequent North America, or if they do like those of Southern Europe and therefore refer to the indigenous tribes of Brazil or the Andes. Manfreda replies that the Sicilian Vikindians have the privilege of choice. Some follow in the footsteps of the Vikings; others follow the path southwards opened by the Celts. His family had given up in the middle and joined the settled and semi-settled tribes of Mexico, Texas, and California. Before lunch, Manfreda takes them on a tour of the property. The clearing where the house stands is completely surrounded by a huge expanse of pistachio trees that Manfreda tends and maintains. Joe asks why the pistachios grow so high above their maximum altitude. Manfreda replies that it is normal for a Vikindian to be able to make plants do miraculous things. She thus explains that the Vikindian, having activated their personal power, also develop another: that of making the flora around them burst with luxuriance. She adds that his mother, Caroline, is an example of this. The answer takes Joe aback. If his mother is able to make the flora flourish, it means that she has developed her power, and she also has a

sickle. How is it possible that he never realized this? Manfreda, understanding Joe's perplexity, goes on to say that she met his mother on her way from the McAllan ranch in Kentucky before reaching the Rocky Mountain tribes, where she would practice her power for a few months and live the Indian way. Manfreda points out to them that she is the Guardian of Etna, that is, the one who watches over Taranis, the metal condor that, like the golden bison in Yellowstone, is a prisoner under the volcano. If those pistachios were gone, the beast would be ready to emerge. Joe doesn't understand how pistachios are related to it. He thought it was the totem animals that were the seal that imprisoned the beasts. Manfreda explains that pistachios attract many rodents, who eat the fruit. That is why she, in a continuous cycle, makes those plants fruit all year round. Rodents are the favorite food of birds of prey such as owls, hawks, and eagles that nest around the plantation. Birds of prey are the place's totem animal. And her power is precisely that of communicating with those birds; they obey her like a mother. That is why she was chosen by Vikindian cheftains as guardian of that particular place. Not only that. Thanks to her birds, she manages to know everything that happens on the island without ever leaving her home. Peter, meanwhile, calls them in for lunch. While enjoying their lunch, Joe inquires if, in her role as guardian, she has ever encountered the Druids or experienced any difficulties with them. In fact, the Grand Druid knows that her companions are prisoners in some volcano, so he will no doubt have tried to find them, starting with the most famous ones, such as Vesuvius or Mount Etna. Manfreda responds negatively. Since she has been there, nothing unusual has ever happened, also because the place is well protected and security measures are tight, as they too have experienced. Frog asks why

the pistachio tree at the entrance to the secret path reacts to the scythe rubbing. Peter replies that that tree inside holds the sickle of his father, who passed away many years ago. Peter asks them if they have been to the Victoria and Albert Museum and if they have seen the golden sickle on display in the Celtic section, the one that is embedded inside the tree trunk. Joe and Frog answer yes and would like to know more, but Manfreda changes the subject and tells them that the birds of prey told her about the horn being blown in Sicily. Anyway there is little to be cheerful about. It seems that the horn has already left the island on an anonymous boat headed east. But even if the horn is no longer here, the Grand Druid is still nearby, and they are all in danger. Joe and the others confirm and recount that, after their arrival in the Straits of Messina, Frances's tattoo had started to pulsate. Manfreda believes that it is mainly Frances who is in danger, because Kellan certainly does not allow any of his adepts to escape. Manfreda makes it clear that he knows a bond is developing between Frances and Joe. Joe makes an embarrassed face. Manfreda adds that the Grand Druid will almost certainly attempt to break that relationship by killing them both once he has achieved his goal, which is to seize the horn, free his master and his cronies, and destroy the Vikindians. Manfreda speaks this way because it is necessary to start with the fact that Kellan, thanks to the tattoo, always knows where Frances is, and therefore, if he wanted to take her back, he would have done so long before they reached Sicily. How many Vikindians with fully developed power and equipped with sickles were traveling with them on the boat? Were Jessie Mario, Teo, and his sister the only ones aboard? If only the Grand Druid had appeared, he would have made mincemeat of all three. Instead, he allowed her and the others to go their

own way, and it appears that he is now following them along their path. Kellan has evidently realized that Joe and Frog are looking for the horn, and Frances allows him to follow their progress from afar. Kellan is determined to obtain the horn, as it is the only instrument capable of enabling him to exact his revenge. But there is a way to loosen the grip in which he holds the girl. Manfreda fetches a wristband made of very thick, finely embroidered cloth. Matilda crafted the wristband herself using a unique yarn she creates from the feathers of predatory birds, which her daughter gathers during her visits to her mother. It is elastic, waterproof, fireproof, insulating, and, above all, a tough fabric. Matilda crafts unique garments out of this fabric for the Vikindians, whose overflowing powers require containment. With the watchful eye of her raptors alerting her to their arrival and Frances's presence, Manfreda instructed her daughter to meticulously craft the wristband for Frances. This wristband would not only protect Frances but also shield Joe and the others from Kellan's nagging, enabling them to search for the horn without interference. If Frances dons that wristband, the Grand Druid will no longer be able to track her. Manfreda asserts that the wristband, put on to cover the tattoo, attenuates the signal even if it doesn't cancel it. Frog takes it and sets it aside.

Set 12

After saying goodbye and thanking Manfreda and Pietro, Joe and the others descend from Etna and return to Catania. After relaying what Manfreda had told them, Frog removes the embroidered wristband from a pocket and places it on Frances' arm to conceal the tattoo. The girl immediately feels lighter.

Now she can finally reveal more about the Grand Druid. She is immediately peppered with questions, but Mario warns she will have to wait for those answers because Garibaldi has arrived. The general is in Taormina to preplan Messina's siege. As a result, they must leave immediately to meet him in person. Garibaldi has experienced the horn's power on his person, so he is very well informed about the facts. Before leaving, Mario remembers that a telegram arrived for Joe from Washington. It is from his father. The text reads: the bison hunting law is blocked in congress - opposition from the big ranchers - General Custer agrees with them - riots in the capital - hurry up. They meet Garibaldi in a building in the center of Taormina where the Garibaldian headquarters have been set up. Mario whispers something in Garibaldi's ear, and he gets all his men out of the room. When the last of the Garibaldian officers has left the room, Jessie Mario tells those present that Garibaldi has long known everything about the Vikindians, so they can feel free to speak openly with him. The general confirms and adds that Mario has also told him about the horn affair. As Joe and the others search for the horn, Garibaldi shares some of his reflections with them. It is evident that the person who played the instrument in Crimea also played it in Palermo. This is the same person. The old Garibaldian musician, with whom they also had a conversation, confirmed that the instrument's playing was identical. In one case, the expedition against the Russians was saved; now the Expedition of the Thousand in Sicily has met a similar fate. Therefore, the horn is in the hands of someone who has a stake in the success of these two expeditions. In both cases, the horn's power has served the interests of the Kingdom of Piedmont while benefiting the cause of United Italy. He believes that this is where the investigation should begin. The general also

took England's position into consideration. Indeed, the United Kingdom made significant gains in Crimea, where it actively participated with its own troops and is currently sponsoring the Expedition of the Thousand. London has generously financed and equipped the Red Shirts because it wants them to succeed. A unified Italy also suits them. However, the general rejects the English hypothesis. The Garibaldian informed him that the horn in Crimea blew very close to the Piedmontese camp, and its sound only incidentally reached the battlefield and the Franco-British camp. The recovery of the Duke of Worchester's horse and the renewed vigor of the English cavalry were, in short, a side effect of the horn's melody and not the reason why it was sounded. Then, outside the room, there is a hubbub and the desperate voice of a woman asking to speak to the general and the foreigners. Garibaldi recognizes the voice and tells his men to let her in. It is Matilda. Jessie Mario explains that the two know each other as Manfreda is a great friend of the general as she was of the beloved Anita, Garibaldi's deceased wife. Not only that. Manfreda wove the first iconic poncho Garibaldi started wearing during his time in South America. And since then, when the general needs a new one, it is she and, for some years now, her daughter who make it for him. Indeed, Garibaldi embraces the girl affectionately and worriedly asks what the problem is. She replies that something has happened on Mount Etna. While she was embroidering in the street, she heard the excited voices of her fellow citizens pointing to an enormous cloud of black smoke rising from the very spot on the mountain where her mother's house is located. She couldn't even get close to the clearing because a wall of flames and a dense dome of black smoke covered the area, making visibility very poor. Her fear, as well as everyone else's, is that it was Kellan who launched an

attack. He probably tried to free his comrade and, for all they know, may have come close to succeeding. There is not a minute to lose. His mother and brother could be in danger, and if the beast breaks free, the whole world will be in danger too. Frances, fearful and trembling, says it was definitely the Grand Druid. She is unaware of the power the tattoo bestows upon Kellan over the tattooed people, but after what Manfreda revealed to Joe and what transpired today, it is now undeniable that the tattoo enables the Grand Druid to pinpoint her location. So he found them, spied them from afar, and when Joe and the others went to the volcano, he followed them. Now, in all likelihood, he is hunting them and will soon find them all. Matilda points to the wristband, reassuring her. She explains that with that on, the tattoo's signal fades until it almost disappears, so Kellan cannot know for sure where she is. He can only sense her vague presence in a very large area. Garibaldi cuts to the chase and wants a horse prepared for him. He asks Joe and Frog to follow him. Frances says it can be very dangerous to go alone because the Grand Druid might still be there or waiting for them nearby, so Frances must go with them because she knows how Kellan moves and can help them by summoning the Forces of Nature. Mario is not too convinced, but Joe, who is beginning to see Frances from the inside, is sure that her intentions are good. Teo and Odette offer to go with them and watch over Frances, but Garibaldi says there is no need. He knows Frances is a Vikindian turned druid, and he also knows she is a prisoner. But this time the guardian angels are not needed because Garibaldi can take care of Frances himself. Mario, having known him for years, knows this to be true.

Set 13

Garibaldi and the others run towards Bronte. No one knows the way as well as the general. Garibaldi explains that he knows Manfreda from his days in South America, where the woman studied with a relative of her grandmother, who was a jungle shamaness. Several times in Brazil and Uruguay, when Garibaldi and his men were hunted by the enemy and forced to hide in the forest, Manfreda had come to his aid. Moreover, it was Manfreda who had introduced him to Anita. He owes her a substantial debt of gratitude. Garibaldi, in fact, as soon as he arrived in Catania a few days ago, first left his soldiers and immediately went in secret to see Manfreda and both his children, of whom he and Anita are godfathers. The acrid smell of burnt vegetation permeates the air even before they reach the outskirts of Bronte. As they ascend, the curtain of black smoke enveloping Etna's summit grows thicker and thicker. When they reach the pistachio tree, the fire's smoke and heat become unbearable. The flames have not yet reached the tree, but leaves and branches are desperately hanging down. Garibaldi orders Frances to make it rain. Frances concentrates, allowing a heavy rain to fall on the vegetation, which extinguishes the flames within minutes. Then the general orders her to let a strong sirocco wind blow so as to dry everything out. Frances executes. At that point, to the surprise of those present, Garibaldi pulls out a golden sickle from under his poncho and rubs it on the tree, which immediately opens the way behind him. On the way up, they observe that the fire has severely damaged the pistachio forest. The clearing is an inferno of charred trees and burnt grass. Dead or badly injured birds of prey lie all

around, while other birds flit nervously in the sky. Matilda's house is in rubble. Near the well stands Matilda, who has already arrived and, administering water, is trying to assist her mother and brother, who are lying on the ground. Pietro is still unconscious, while Manfreda has regained consciousness. Garibaldi immediately asks Matilda about their health status. Matilda replies that, based on an initial examination, both Pietro and his mother have bad bruises all over their bodies, but nothing more. Pietro has a slight wound on his head that he probably got when he fell. But his breathing and heartbeat are regular. Manfreda, on seeing Garibaldi, pulls herself up with great difficulty and, helped to sit up by her daughter, pulls out all her strength and tells what happened. That morning, the druid buried in Etna made a lot of noise, as if excited by something. Even the predatory birds appeared restless. At one point, the sound of a flute was heard coming from the foot of the plantation at the height of the pistachio tree, and after a short while, suddenly, a whirlwind swept over the house and the plantation while lightning discharges struck the poor birds that had not taken cover. Manfreda was in the house, and Pietro was nearby. Both were overwhelmed and struck by the rubble of the house and the debris swirling in the air. A human-looking figure then emerged from the pistachio bushes. He wore a black brocade tunic embellished with embroidered silver ouroboros and a midnight blue cloak quilted with gold dots of different sizes that resembled a starry sky. Manfreda and her son had never seen him before, but they couldn't help but recognize the Grand Druid in that figure. Although she was not present in Argentina, according to what Anita had told her, Kellan was wearing that same attire even at that time. Frances trembles as she confirms that this is the Grand Druid's usual mode of dress.

When Kellan travels or goes incognito, he dresses in a modern way, adjusting his clothing to the place and environment he is in. But when he is on his property or with his druids, he dresses in his tunic and cloak. Frances does not know who makes his clothes, but after eavesdropping on some conversations of Kellan's personal servants, she knows that they come from some Mediterranean island. Garibaldi becomes pensive after hearing the girl's claims, but says nothing, and Manfreda continues the recount. Upon realizing who stood before them, she and Pietro weakly rose to their feet, unsheathing their sickles and attempting to tackle him. But Kellan, with a bubble of energy, overwhelmed them with a shockwave that knocked them to the ground, disarming them. Then he made flames burst among the pistachio trees. Two more figures emerged from the fire, dressed in normal clothes, and with a nod from Kellan, they began to strike the flying raptors with their ouroboroi killing some and injuring many others. The Grand Druid, who had hitherto remained at a distance, then dematerialized from where he was and reappeared next to both of them, who were still on the ground in shock. Kellan told them to stay calm because he was warning them, not killing them. He knows that even if he eliminated all the totem animals there, he would still not be able to free his companion. Of course, the buried beast, without the imprisoning seal, could do extensive damage, prompting the volcano to erupt with unprecedented violence. The eruption would wipe out Catania and the towns around Etna, obliterating hundreds of thousands of lives. But Taranis would still not be free. Only the horn's sound finally breaks the chains of the captive Druids. So he conveyed the following message to the Vikindian: just as he effortlessly reached Etna, he can also effortlessly reach Yellowstone and all the other

locations of his companions' captivity, as detailed in the Cork manuscript. And, he concluded, just as easily he will get to the horn, and for all of them, it will be the end. Upon hearing these words, Peter, though still groggy, managed to pull out his sickle and lunge in Kellan's direction. But Kellan caused the ground under Peter's feet to buckle, making him lose his balance. While Peter was off balance, Kellan delivered a vicious kick that sent him flying to the ground, causing his head to hit hard. Then, with a sardonic laugh, the Grand Druid dematerialized in a cloud of dust and vanished in a blinding flash. In the meantime, his two acolytes disappeared, hurling themselves into the wall of flames emanating from the burning pistachio plants. An earthquake from the volcano interrupts the conversation, and Matilda reminds everyone that it is the beast that is furiously trying to break free from its prison, and, as Kellan said, if it does not break free, it could cause unprecedented devastation. Garibaldi says he will send Mario and medical staff to look after Manfreda and Pietro's health. Then Jessie will return the house and other buildings to the way they were before. A Garibaldian vet will tend to the wounded and broken-winged birds of prey, bandaging or splinting them to restore their ability to fly. There will be no risk of a leak: that vet is a Vikindian. Regarding the health of the pistachios, Matilda is already ensuring their well-being through her Vikindian power over them. Once she arrives, Mario will assist her in completing the task. Matilda is in fact touching and caressing the burnt plants, which immediately sprout leaves again, while from afar cannon shots are heard in the direction of Messina. This signals that Garibaldi must return to Taormina because it is almost time for the attack. Joe and Frog collect the injured birds and lay them on straw beds while waiting for the vet. Frog also plays a blade of grass to calm them

down. With some difficulty due to her leg, Frances draws water from the well, while Matilda and Garibaldi place Manfreda and Pietro, who has just regained consciousness, on some not-too-burnt rugs recovered from the house's rubble. Before leaving, Garibaldi takes off his poncho, which bears no marks of the bullet that wounded him at Calatafimi, wraps it around itself to make a pillow, and lays it under Pietro's head. Manfreda, while the others are busy, makes it clear to Frances that she wants to tell her something before she leaves. Frances approaches. She knows that Frances would like to help Matilda with the plants, but she has no vital energy because the tattoo siphons it all from her. Frances begins to cry, regretting having abandoned her family and people to follow that bloodthirsty slaughterer. Manfreda comforts her, reminding her that she was only a child at the time, tricked by an ogre so much more cunning than she was, and there was no way she could do otherwise. Manfreda asks Frances to hold on. The tattoo seems indelible, but perhaps Joe will find a way to undo that curse. Frances's cheeks turn red, and Manfreda silently signals to her that she has understood everything, but now they must leave immediately or Garibaldi will be late for his appointment with history. Matilda reminds the general that she had come to Taormina with a gift for him. That very gift was the reason for her visit, if what happened had not happened. After learning about Calatafimi, the girl made a new poncho for Garibaldi from the same yarn she used to make the wristband for Frances. It is waterproof, fireproof, and, above all, bulletproof. It is in a cloth bag, which she handed over to one of the general's attendants. When Garibaldi returns to command, he'll find it there. The group sets off again for the slopes of Etna.

Set 14

As they ride down from the volcano, Joe asks Garibaldi how he knows about the Vikindian and the Druids, as well as how he knows about the horn. Garibaldi explains that because of Anita, he knows everything. Anita, too, was a Vikindian and possessed her own unique power. Her power was the ability to not suffer hunger and thirst, as well as to always be able to find something to eat and good water to drink. Without Anita, Garibaldi and his Legion would not have survived the numerous times they were hunted in the jungle in South America. And Garibaldi knows about the horn because Anita too was looking for it. In fact, more than 15 years ago, on the Osorno volcano in the Andes, the local guardian, a childhood friend of hers, was particularly worried by the fact that the volcano continually erupted. The pumas guarding its seal had been struck by a strange epidemic that was killing them, and only the horn could put an end to it. At the time, Anita didn't clarify to him why the volcano guardian required the golden horn and why the horn could defeat an epidemic; however, she was determined to locate it at all costs. Anita was convinced that the horn was in Italy because it appeared that animal and plant diseases did not take root there. Italian exports had taken a big leap in the last 50 years, and many cities had modernized and industrialized thanks to that money. This could not have been by chance. That's why she had insisted to him that they should both go to Italy and look for it. They had searched for the horn in Milan, Tuscany, or Rome. But no luck. There was no trace of it. No matter how much they investigated, no one in Italy had ever heard that instrument being played. The economic miracle, especially in northern

Italy, was simply linked to a more favorable climate than in the previous century and to technological and organizational improvements in agriculture. So his wife's hypothesis, although at first it seemed plausible, proved to be wrong. But Anita did not give up. They were in Nice in the Garibaldi household when, in Rome, in 1848, the pope-king was ousted and the Republic was declared, and Garibaldi was called upon to organize his defense forces. Anita, too, wanted to join the rebels and go with her husband because, in fact, they had never sought the horn in Rome. Anita had in fact worked out another hypothesis. The horn was originally kept in a Catholic monastery, but it still referred to pagan rituals that the church had fought against for centuries until the complete Christianization of the Celts and Vikings. With the French Revolution, the Church's prestige and preponderance in people's lives had greatly diminished, and with freedom of worship, ancient Nordic pagan cults had also resurfaced, which went hand in hand with independence and nationalist movements. Movements that had non-religious or even anti-clerical leaders. Consequently, an object charged with such symbolic value could have been the catalyst for a revival of Celtic and Viking religion in an anti-Catholic function. So it was not so rash to assume that the Vatican had decided to make it disappear by hiding it somewhere in Rome. Adopting this tactic for the Church, would not have been the first time, nor would it be the last. They left their two children with their grandmother on the French Riviera and headed for Rome. But despite their assiduous search, it seemed that no one in Rome had ever even heard of the idea that an ancient pagan musical instrument stolen from Ireland was in the city. Even if the search for the horn was in vain, the Capitoline sojourn provided the couple with magnificent days. They were living in an annex

of the Villa Panphili on the Janiculum Hill, and, although they had arrived in December, since Anita settled there, the villa's park began to overflow with flowers even though the compound had been turned into a fortress. Every evening, Garibaldi and his wife took a horseback ride along the city walls to observe the progress of the fortification work. That year was a godsend for the shepherds, who found fresh grass in large quantities every day around the walls. Summer arrived, and with it came the French military contingent that laid siege to the city. The republicans fought with all their might, but the French army was clearly superior, and, after a month of fighting, Rome's defenses gave way. He and Anita, in those 30 days of siege, had not lost heart and had fired every shot as if it were that of the final victory. Even with the French in the city, their fighting vigor had not altered. But day by day, the situation became more critical for the republic's defenders, and the final battle soon arrived. The last outpost to resist was the Janiculum Hill, which was attacked from multiple directions. On that occasion, Garibaldi saw Anita pale for the first time. It was not due to the overwhelming presence of French soldiers. In fact, until then his wife had fought like a lioness to fend off, even at the bayonet, the assailants until, among the enemy soldiers, she spotted someone who made her tremble, and Garibaldi, for the first time, saw Anita afraid. Those who had frightened his wife were an officer and two soldiers. But his wife had no time to react. The fake French officer, wearing a sadistic smile, pulled from his jacket a kind of metal boomerang and, in a flash, hurled it toward Anita. She defended herself with her sickle, but the ouroboros managed to wound her seriously in the abdomen. Garibaldi ordered his men to return fire, and the Garibaldians flooded the three attackers with a hail of bullets — yet those

bastards seemed immune to them. After a short while, the three soldiers vanished into a thick fog that rose suddenly, and when visibility returned, they were gone. He later discovered that they were the Grand Druid and two of his acolytes. According to Manfreda's descriptions, the same three who had also attacked her. During the escape, Anita explained to him that the Grand Druid had attacked her in revenge for the trap she had driven him into a few years earlier in Argentina. The wound was bad, and she was losing a lot of blood. Anita didn't want to see any doctors, but she sked to be taken to Santorini for treatment. She didn't provide an explanation for her decision to travel to Santorini, which seemed far away to Garibaldi, but she assured him that the bleeding would cease soon and they would have ample time to reach the Aegean. Indeed, as the days passed, Anita's condition remained stable, and so they arrived in Romagna. While they were deciding from which city to embark for Greece, as guests in a remote farmhouse in the coastal marshes of Ravenna, Kellan and his men reappeared. They had intercepted them following the trail of green that Anita was leaving behind her. At that moment, Anita was too weak to defend herself with the sickle, and this time the ouroboros struck its mark, killing her. Garibaldi was then blind with fury. He took his wife's sickle and hurled it at the assassins. The two thugs immediately fled into the vegetation, while the Grand Druid remained undaunted at his post, ready to face Garibaldi. When the General had him within sickle's reach, the ground beneath Garibaldi's feet turned to mud, pulling him down to his knees before abruptly solidifying again. An electric shock, like a small bolt of lightning, knocked the sickle from his hand, and Kellan was able to approach him with impunity. He told him that what had happened to Anita was the just punishment for

those who dared to challenge his might. Garibaldi would not suffer the same fate. The Grand Druid would let him live so he could tell all Vikindians what he was capable of. But Garibaldi was not to think he would be safe forever. When the time came, Kellan would return for his children. They were not powerless like him; they were Vikindian. Then, after a devilish laugh, he disappeared in a flash of magnesium. Joe cannot help but notice that the Grand Druid likes to play cat and mouse. He did it with Manfreda, too. So he asks why the general, now that he knows his wife's murderers and his children's tormentors are nearby, doesn't order his troops to get on their trail and annihilate them. Garibaldi replies that, unfortunately, Kellan is too strong even for all the Garibaldians put together, and there is no way to defeat him with conventional weapons. So, even though Kellan is nearby, the general cannot do much to capture him. The only solution is for Joe and Frog to find the horn, which, having sounded in Palermo a few weeks ago, may still be around here. If, as Garibaldi suspects, the horn belongs to a patriot, then this patriot has only recently acquired the instrument. Because if that horn had been rematerialized earlier, say in 1848, for the patriots, the history of Italy might have gone differently. That year, revolutionary uprisings erupted throughout the different italian states, leading to numerous battles for the Italian Unification cause. The Austrians would never have succeeded in retaking Milan and Bologna with the horn on the Italian side, and the Roman Republic would still be standing. Joe tells Garibaldi that he is Johanna's nephew, and the general replies that Joe's aunt was very close to Anita. They had several meetings and even embarked on several adventures together, with the most memorable being the one in Argentina where the Grand Druid nearly killed Frances' grandmother.

Unfortunately, there was one victim, but Taigi was spared from becoming the second. They are close to Taormina when suddenly a Garibaldian on horseback appears, coming at full speed in the general's direction. The soldier informs Garibaldi that they are all searching for him, as Messina is now under siege and he must spearhead the assault on the city.

Set 15

They arrive at the headquarters, where a throng of soldiers and officers await the general's orders. In the chaos that follows their arrival, Garibaldi tells them that Anita wanted to travel to Santorini for treatment because a friend of hers lived there. The general is unsure of the reason, but Anita was convinced that this friend could help her recover. This woman, believed to be a Vikindian healer, may have knowledge about the horn. However, he does not know who this friend of Anita's is. The only clue he can give them is that Anita had told him it was her friend who said that seals—those cute, funny mammals—can be quite aggressive when threatened and, when in danger, bite with considerable force. After a brief consultation with Jessie Mario and the others, it is decided that they will try the Aegean trail and the search will be relocated to Kellan's former prison. Mario goes to confer privately with Garibaldi and then returns to the group. She must now immediately rush to Bronte to assist Manfreda. The steamer for Greece sails from Catania the next morning, but Joe and the others cannot go dressed as they are. Kellan followed them to Etna and will continue tailing them now; therefore, in order to jeopardize him, they all need a disguise. Tonight, as the battle for Messina continues, a

multitude of wounded will require transportation to hospitals more advanced in equipment than the field hospital. Therefore, at around midnight, an ambulance convoy will leave Taormina and head for Catania. They will hide there. Odette will wear a nurse's outfit, and, in addition to looking after the convoy's safety, she will help the nurses in caring for the wounded. Joe, Frog, and Teo will dress as Garibaldians in red shirts, and will each drive an ambulance wagon. Frances, unable to appear in public without causing dismay, will don the habit of the Sisters Hospitallers of the Most Holy Charity. The sisters are obliged to cover their faces with a white veil. Furthermore, since Frances cannot walk and therefore cannot help the nurses, she will sit with Joe on the driver's box, and together they will lead the convoy. Frances' task will be to cover the potholes that dot the road using her telluric powers. It will not be an effortless task because there has been intense fighting on that road, and there are several potholes resulting from artillery shelling. In front of them, leading the way, will be a squad of trusted Garibaldians, chosen by Garibaldi himself. Since they know everything about the Vikindians and Druids, they won't care what Frances does to the road. The journey passes smoothly that night. At first light in the morning, with the steamer already beginning its embarkation operations, Joe and the others, still in Garibaldian dress, wait for Mario. A little later, at a trot, she also arrives returning directly from Bronte. Everyone asks how Manfreda is. Mario replies that she is fine now and that everything has been put right. A Vikindian vet accompanied her, successfully restoring the health of Manfreda's prey birds, and indeed, as they can see, Etna no longer quakes or expels lapilli. Manfreda and Pietro will soon recover, as, in the end, they got away with only a serious scare and a few grazes that will heal in a few days.

The steamer blows its whistle, signaling passengers to board immediately. Mario could not go to Santorini because she had to stay with Garibaldi—at least until he conquered Naples. She greets everyone with affection, wishing them the best luck. She also extends her greetings to Frances, for whom Mario has a gift; she hands her the paper containing the melody's notes. Mario says she's confident that Frances will make good use of it. As they are saying goodbye, a man with a small suitcase is boarding the ship. The stepladder remains behind Joe and the others, so they cannot see him, but Mario is facing him. The man nods a greeting to Mario, and she reciprocates with an imperceptible raise of the eyebrow. A piece of red shirt emerges from the man's suitcase.

8

Chapter 8 - Santorini

Set 1

The steamer for Greece is on regular service and, after Catania, touches Malta, Crete, Rhodes, and finally Santorini before continuing on to Constantinople. On the quay, passengers of various nationalities parade. The ship is full. Having boarded the ship and barely at sea, Joe hears a knock at the door of his cabin. It is a ship's officer telling to follow him on the captain's orders. The sailor leads Joe to a door and knocks. Then he leaves, and Joe enters a room full of nautical charts and a reference table with a map of the Mediterranean open. There are two men inside. One sitting and the other standing. The two individuals are a Catholic bishop and a military man, possibly even a general. These two individuals, the military man and the prelate, were present at the dinner at Bison. The bishop is the one who breaks the delay. He gets up and walks over to Joe to shake his hand. This is Monsignor Rory McAllan, his and the abbot's relative; the other is Count Otto Von Eckstein, Grand Master of the Order

of the Knights of Malta and chieftain of the German-speaking Vikindian tribe. Joe then asks the prelate which tribe he is chief of. Rory smiles and replies that he is not a chieftain. If Joe is referring to the dinner at the Golden Bison, the prelate was present as a representative of the McAllans, the family that is entitled to guard the horn. Joe then wonders within himself, "If there are 10 Vikindian tribes, why were there only 9 chiefs at that dinner?" But instead of voicing his doubt, Joe inquires about the whereabouts of the two men. They tell him that Mario, after what happened to Manfreda, alerted all the Vikindian chieftains of Kellan's presence in Sicily. When they received the communication, they were both in Genoa to attend an Order's ceremony. As soon as they heard the news, they immediately embarked and are on their way to Malta to organize a counter-offensive. There are many Vikindians in the Order of which the monsignor is High Prelate, that is, ecclesiastical superior of the Order's clerics. The count explains the reason for the confidentiality of that meeting. Firstly, both he and the others have now been publicly associated with Garibaldi, who, let us not forget, is officially an enemy of the Church. So two prominent figures of the Catholic establishment cannot be seen with a friend of the pope's archenemy. What's more, Joe is a Protestant. Secondly, the Grand Druid might have infiltrated his henchmen on the ship, or he might have been on board himself. Their disguise as Garibaldians might not have fooled him. But, adds the monsignor, it is the details of this conversation that must remain away from prying ears. Father McAllan is, within the Church, the best educated and most well-versed in the history of Nordic pagan cults. Throughout his ecclesiastical career, he has explored, scoured, and studied the convents and libraries of Christendom both north and south of Europe, collecting

and cataloging every available source, such as ecclesiastical chronicles, diaries of monks and prelates, and miscellany of myths and legends. He has always believed that comprehending Kellan's logic necessitates an understanding of the Druids themselves. Joe presents the two with the information his cousin Richard gave him at the Victoria and Albert museum. He also talks about the two exhibits that were stolen from him. The monsignor states that he is aware of the disappearance of the artifacts and no one is happy about that. They are two very valuable finds. That half metal flute found at the bottom of the Aegean is suspected to have belonged to the last of the archdruids, namely Cathbad. Joe already knows that the Druids were divided into two large groups, namely the Druids of the Earth, who kept the forces of Nature at bay, and the Druids of the Stars, who instead stimulated the Forces of Heaven. But he would like to know what exactly it meant to be a member of one group or the other. The monsignor explains it using an example. The growth of crops or fodder for domestic and wild animals depended on the fertility of the soil and rain. As the years went by, an Earth Druid developed a certain ability to soften the climate and weather, as well as to manage what came from the land. But a successful harvest also depended on the plants' health and control over the animals. The Druids of the Stars, with time, acquired power over plants and trees and thus made crops and gardens grow luxuriantly. With a certain ascendancy, but not power, over animals, the Druids of the Stars ensured that insects or pests did not kill the seedlings, nor did wild animals ravage the fields. The joint efforts of the two Druidic groups ensured fertility, an abundance of water, lushness, and, consequently, well-being. Both druidic circles were led by an archdruid, who was the highest authority and

the most powerful master within their ranks. Allan was the archdruid of the Druids of the Stars, while Cathbad held that role for the Earth Druids. To summon Nature's forces, the Druids made use of a sacred flute that only the Archdruids could possess and play. The melody that served to activate both natural and celestial forces was known only to them. They learned it by heart and then passed it on to their successor. Of course, even the older druids, having heard the two melodies many times, each his own, could have played it. However, these two flutes, distinct from all others, bore a unique ouroboros mark, granting only those deserving of it the ability to produce sound. Those who couldn't or shouldn't have played the flute would have received an irritating electric shock, which would have caused them to faint. The flute of the Archdruid of the Stars was made from the ivory of a walrus tooth and mounted an ouroboros made of indium that had been cast directly onto the ivory because that metal melts at around 100 degrees. The indium used for the ouroboros of the ivory flute practically pervaded every cavity of the ivory and even penetrated the fibers. The flute of the Earth Druids had been made from the iron of a meteorite that the Druids of the Stars had brought down from the sky. The corresponding ouroboros was made of pure copper and had been melted down together with the flute. The Druids of the Stars made the ivory flute in Ireland, and the Earth Druids forged the iron flute in their volcanic forges on an unidentified Mediterranean island, storing it there outside of ordinary ritual. Joe inquires about which island. The monsignor, showing him a map of the Aegean Sea, replies that unfortunately it is not known. Not only is there no mention of the island in the archival sources, but Allan and his contemporaries also left no useful information about it. According to Allan, the volcano on that

island had ended up turning into a monster factory, and he therefore wanted the memory of that place to be lost, ordering everyone to never mention it again and not to reveal anything to their descendants. Moreover, the division between the Druids had dissipated in the fusion of Druidism and Shamanism, so that island was a symbol of a division that had passed, and there was no reason to keep its memory alive. Consequently, the narrative of Allan's victory over the Golden Bison and its imprisonment only mentions the island in passing, without any further reference. Nor does it help to know that the island is volcanic because many islands in the Aegean are of volcanic origin. It's even possible that the island sank due to a volcanic eruption, a phenomenon similar to that of Ferdinandea Island, also known as Graham Island in England. Joe doesn't remember the story, and the monsignor provides a brief explanation. The island emerged from the sea in the summer of 1831 and disappeared in the waves in early 1832. The island is a part of the underwater volcano Empedocles, 30 km (19 mi) south of Sicily, which is one of a number of submarine volcanoes known as the Campi Flegrei of the Sicilian Sea. A seamount eruption raised it above sea level, and erosion submerged it again. In 1831, a Royal Navy captain who was sailing there named the island after Sir James Graham, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and claimed it for the United Kingdom. Joe asks why the iron flute, recovered from the Aegean, didn't provide any clue about the island where it had been forged. The prelate replies that the object's provenance is essentially unknown. A Vikindian had happened to spot it in an old iron shop in Athens and bought it for a few pennies. When asked about its origin, the seller said he knew nothing, because scrap metal was purchased on the islands and in the Peloponnese and then all thrown together, in bulk,

into the holds of junk dealers' ships. The piles of metal were later unloaded into a warehouse at the port, mixing them even further. From there, the metal was distributed to end buyers like him, who supplied blacksmiths and boilermakers. So the flute could have come from anywhere in Greece. The monsignor resumes the narrative. Whenever the flute was served, the Druids of Earth would leave the island, reach the place of the ritual, and, having played the flute, return to the island or move to another place where the sacred melody was needed before descending southwards. That island, inhabited only by Celts/Vikings, was the place where the Druids of Earth gathered in plenary session every solstice, and it was there that they went to reside when the hour of their departing approached. In fact, at a given moment, the dying druid threw himself into the lava to the sound of the iron flute. The druid's spirit, honed by years of magical practices, remained in the bubbling lava, ready to spring into action. It was the ultimate weapon of the Germanic and Celtic peoples should their existence be threatened. Those spirits, if summoned, would transform into terrible, vengeful monsters and wipe out the threat forever. Every Druid spirit that entered the volcano made the weapon's striking capacity more powerful. To summon it, one had to play the melody of the Archdruid of the Earth in reverse with the iron flute. When the dying Druid had thrown himself into the volcano, with the iron flute still playing, the crater ejected blobs of glowing metal, which, when cooled, turned out to be pure gold. The Druids worked this gold to make the sickles that the Star Druids used to draw power from plants. Lagrange served as the base for the Druids of the Stars, housing both their archdruid and the ivory flute. They too departed from there whenever the flute was needed. Unlike their colleagues, they chose a sacred wood for their departure.

Surrounded by younger Druids, they would approach the oldest tree in the forest at the sound of the flute, take a special potion, a European form of Wanige, and melt into the tree. The scythe remained embedded inside the tree, while on the outside, a golden ouroboros would take form. This kind of ouroboros, if stimulated in the right way, sent out celestial vibrations from the mouths of the snakes that made it up, enabling the Druid to mitigate the climate or influence the earth. But it was also an instrument of defense. In case of danger, sharp blades emerged from the snakes' mouths. Kellan's ouroboroi is not known where they came from, but they must have been produced by the volcano on that unknown island. Evidently Kellan remembered where the island was, got himself a flute, and, perverting the melodies, managed to create those terrible instruments of death made not of pure gold, which brings blessings, but of its opposite, namely black silver, which carries dark forces. Incidentally, in Lagrange, a plenary session of all druids was held every year on the night of St. John. Joe asks if the two archdruids also shared the same fate as their acolytes, and the monsignor confirms. Before leaving, however, the incumbent archdruids would choose their successor and pass on all their secrets to him, eventually handing him the flute and teaching him how to use it. 'We have now arrived at our Indian counterpart,' the count continues. Before the contacts between Indians and Vikings, shamans were also divided between those who dealt with earthly spirits and those who interacted with heavenly spirits. The former built the great megalithic hills with which North America is strewn, while the latter dispensed preparations to read the intentions of the stars. The former played drums and danced around the stone hills, while the latter were fine connoisseurs of the power of herbs and plants while holed up in the woods.

Each tribe had the ones and had the others. In the beginning, all the Indian tribes were living in forests, but when they became very populous and needed to find larger territories in which to live, they began to move westwards and encountered the Great Plains. In those vast spaces where heaven and earth touch, there are neither stones nor trees, so the two types of shamanism merged into one. With the shamans gathered around a fire, through the vibrations of drums, dances, and the power of herbs, they were able to connect to that united force of Heaven and Earth that they called the Great Spirit. This force made game abundant and protected the tribes from natural disasters or animal attacks. In their old age, Indian shamans went to die far away from the tribe. They were often prey to animals who, by eating their bodies, spread their spirit everywhere. In contact with air and earth, this spirit transmuted into small or large metal nuggets. The earth shamans became iron ores, and the Indians made the points of their arrows and spears out of them. Sky shamans became silver conglomerates, which the natives transformed into jewelry. North America was full of these nugget deposits that, over time, had become concentrated in rivers, lakes, or under mountains of earth. The Indians would have enjoyed them for generations and generations. That was until the Vikings, Celts, and native peoples of North and South America met. The contact between Druids and Shamans and the consequent exchange of knowledge led more and more Druids, especially those of the Stars, to believe that it was appropriate to try to merge the two Druidic rituals, bring the two brotherhoods together, and evoke Heavenly Forces and Earthly Forces jointly. That is, to combine the two melodies. In other words, it would involve uniting the two flutes and playing the intertwined melodies together, a task that had never been done

before and was even forbidden. There would then remain only one Archdruid. Not only that. The Druidic and Indian traditions had to merge at some point. The combined Druidic melody, rhythmized by the Indian drums, would have manifested great wonders. The first of these portents caused everyone's rites of departure to change. When Druids and Shamans, whom we can call Vikindian, reach the limits of their old age, they leave for the most remote and isolated place they can reach. Under the starry sky, they dance and sing hymns to the Great Spirit, accompanied by the sound of flutes and drums, until they gradually transform into cosmic dust. This dust rises to the sky and remains there, serving as the source of vital energy that invigorates flora for all Vikindians with developed power. Joe asks how Catholics, or Christians in general, reconcile these facts with their religious beliefs. The monsignor responds by saying that Christianity is based on the notion that there is one divine source that radiates everything. This divine principle is also invoked through music. Gregorian chant serves precisely this purpose, so there is not much difference between a church organ and the two flutes, or even the golden horn. In short, Christianity philosophized in a Greco-Roman way what many other peoples had already understood: the divine is one with multiple facets. The pagans, including the early Celts and Vikings, believed instead that the divine was only the facets without seeing the one. The Vikindians and certain Indian tribes converted to Christianity without problems, precisely because they had already abandoned polytheism. The Church also recognizes supernatural phenomena and admits the possibility of possessing personal powers as a gift from the Holy Spirit. Therefore, none of the Vikindians are in heresy when they develop and use their power because the Great Spirit or the

Eternal Father are equivalent theological concepts. The only caution a Vikindian must always keep in mind is to keep a low profile and not to show off because the ways of the Lord are infinite, but not everyone has the ability to understand some of His ways. Someone knocks on the door. The second officer alerts the excellencies to the ship's impending arrival in Malta, advising them to prepare for disembarkation. Their attendants are looking for them everywhere. The monsignor bids Joe farewell by calling him cousin, and he announces that when Brandon retires, he will inherit the monastery's duties. In addition to being abbot of the monastery, he will have himself appointed bishop of the diocese of Cork, and, from there, he will be able to watch over that horn that Joe will hopefully find again soon. The Earl draws his broadsword and secretly bestows upon him the knighthood of the order, presenting him with a graduated badge for recognition among his members. Joe joins the others who are on deck watching the passengers disembark. The ship continues on its journey.

Set 2

At Santorini's dock in the island's marina, Joe, Frog, Frances, and her two guardians disembark. To get their luggage back, they will have to wait until late afternoon because unloading operations have a precise order and precedence. The mail comes first, followed by the foodstuffs and perishable goods, and finally, the remaining cargo in the hold. Passengers' luggage comes last. As they take a tour around the port, they wonder how to find the woman Garibaldi tipped them off. What clue could it be that a 'Greek' or supposedly 'Greek' woman was a friend

of a South American woman? And then there was the matter of the seals. Anita's friend might have something to do with it. Frances has never seen a real seal in her life, but she remembers reading that there are also seals in the Mediterranean, so there might be some on that island somewhere. Although, at first glance, they don't see any seals around. If they find the seals, maybe they'll also find the woman. They decide to introduce themselves to the islanders as part of a Victoria and Albert Museum's scientific expedition studying seals. To make the staging more believable, Joe shows a museum brochure each time—the one he had picked up during his visit with Richard. Many of the islanders, unable to read the Latin alphabet, fall for it. They try asking around to the fishermen and the women at the market, but receive short, evasive but nevertheless peremptory answers on one point: there are no seals on this island. It is lunchtime, and still without a clue, they sit down to dinner at an outdoor table overlooking the harbor. There is a buzuki playing from inside the tavern. At a certain moment, a well-dressed man appears at their table, speaking fluent English but with a strong Greek accent. He is Zander Florakis, a retired professor of archeology. He is originally from Santorini, but he worked at the University of Athens and was a visiting scholar at various English universities for a long time. He is now back home, enjoying a well-earned rest. The island is small, and when he heard that foreign scholars had arrived, he immediately rushed to meet them because it is not often that he gets to talk to someone from the outside world. They introduce themselves as researchers at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Joe shows him his cousin's business card, saying that they work for the director himself. Florakis says he has met Dr. Richard Campbell several times and attended some of his lectures. He is a huge admirer of his, so

he is pleased to put himself at their service. Asked about seals, the professor confirms that there are none on the island and in the entire archipelago. Odette retorts that in Paris, she saw seals in the circus that the tamer claimed were from Greece. The show's presenter then explained that those seals were monk seals, which are common throughout the Mediterranean. The professor corrects the girl by saying that monk seals were, rather than are, common in the Mediterranean. The waters of the Mediterranean, especially the eastern Mediterranean, are teeming with killer whales that, over time, have wiped out seals. Man has done the rest. In Greece, they are now practically absent. Scattered colonies of them can be found on some Croatian islands, on a few Mediterranean cliffs in Morocco and Algeria, and a few herds roam the Turkish Black Sea coast. In short, there are no seals on Santorini, nor are there any on the surrounding islands. Frances, surprising Joe with her readiness, replies that it does not matter because another objective of their scientific mission is to collect information and findings on the island's volcanic past. They are not volcanologists, but their task involves gathering evidence from the local population and collecting samples of lava rock, which experts in London will subsequently study. They are pleased to accept Florakis' offer to help them in their research, but first they need to find accommodation. They are looking for a house that is discreet and does not attract attention, making clear that price is not an issue. The professor says he has just the right thing for them. After lunch, he takes them to visit a multi-story villa nestled in a steep cliff. It can only be reached by sea or by a stepped path carved into the rock that only those who know it can find. However, from inside the house, a tunnel dug under the cliff leads directly to the harbor but is invisible to those who do

not know of its existence: the tunnel entrance to the harbor is masked by a closed entrance that looks like a cellar from the outside. It is the ideal house, and they accept. The professor tells them that they can already occupy it, and he will send them their luggage. For the contract and payment of the rent, everything is postponed until the next day. The house is the property of the island's municipality, and one must present at the town hall for ratifications and payments. He is only doing his duty as a decent citizen and friend of the mayor. They arrange to meet the next day near the town hall. The professor promises to take them, after the bureaucratic formalities, to one of the most characteristic volcanic spots on the island. It was formerly the rim of the volcano and was close to the lava reservoir, leaving the area rich in rocks of all shapes and colors. At lunch, they will visit a winery that produces wine of particular value thanks to the volcanic soil in which the vines are cultivated. The inner cellar, where the wine is stored, is carved into the rock that was once submerged in lava, allowing them to see what was once the bowels of the volcano.

Set 3

The next day they find Florakis waiting for them outside the Town Hall. He invites them in and leads them straight to the mayor's office, where they are warmly welcomed. The man speaks broken but still understandable English. He had fought alongside the English volunteers during the Greek War of Independence. The mayor's secretary presents Joe with the papers to sign and collects the rental fee, issuing a tax receipt. Once the formalities are completed, the mayor wishes

them a pleasant stay on the island. When they are outside the town hall, they find a country wagon roughly fitted with benches for transporting people. The professor speaks with the carter, pays him a sum of money, and the man then leaves him with the reins and the wagon, heading off to a tavern in the harbor. Florakis invites everyone aboard and takes a seat on the driver's box. Along the way, the professor tells them about the island's volcanic history. The present archipelago of Santorini was originally a single circular island with a volcanic crater in the center, like the island of Vulcano in Sicily. It took its present shape because it was devastated and gutted by an apocalyptic volcanic eruption between 1627 BC and 1600 BC that caused the central crater to collapse, which was later almost completely invaded by the sea, leaving the outer parts to emerge. This created the archipelago's current shape, which is similar to a ring with remnants of the central caldera in the center. It was the most massive eruption in European history, and, according to some theories, it would have had disastrous consequences for the Minoan civilization; many historians think that it would have been the main cause of the beginning of its complete decline. In fact, the eruption's aftermath devastated Crete, located less than 200 km to the south. The eruption first unleashed a powerful earthquake, followed by a gigantic tsunami that ravaged the island's coastline, and finally, a thick shower of incandescent ash and lapilli fell on Crete. Today, the archipelago consists of four islands. The Ancient Greeks called the main island, where they stand right now, Thera. The present name 'Santorini' was given to it by the Venetians, who corrupted the name of St. Irene of Thessalonica, martyr in 304 AD, to whom the basilica of Agia Irini in the village of Perissa in the south-eastern part of the island was dedicated. The church,

possibly built in the fifth or sixth century A.D., is now in ruins. The second island is called Therasia, or, as the Greeks prefer to say, Thirasia, which is eight times smaller than Thera. The island is sparsely inhabited compared to its larger sister island. Then, in the center, there is Palea Kameni, or Old Caldera, which is what remains of the caldera that collapsed at the time of the Minoan eruption, and Nea Kameni, the New Caldera, which is the most recent volcanic island as it has a still active volcano at its center. Joe asks when the last island sprung up, and the professor replies that, over the centuries, the volcano at the center had erupted from time to time, but the lava that spewed out was not enough to form an island that would emerge from the sea. It emerged with the eruption of 1761. According to the chronicles, that eruption was so spectacular that night, even the weather went crazy. But it had little or no consequences for the local people, other than the appearance of a new island on the horizon. After arriving at the former rim of the volcano and collecting multicolored obsidians and geoliths full of crystals, they go to the cellar for lunch.

Set 4

The winery looks like a snow-white house from the outside. They enter, and the professor makes himself known. The tavernkeeper seats them at a table in a circular dining room. Because of the exterior paint, it is not clear from the outside that the building is constructed entirely of lava rock bricks. The tavernkeeper returns with some appetizers and a jug of wine, explaining in Greek the main dishes his daughter is cooking for them. Florakis translates into English. As the tavernkeeper is

about to leave, Joe asks the man if he can take him to see the cellar. Wanting to maintain his cover, he adds that he is curious to observe the lava rock from underground. The tavernkeeper replies that it is no problem and takes Joe to a deep cave carved into the rock. There, before the massive Minoan eruption, had been the rim of the volcano's inner crater, which had been submerged in lava. As a result, molten rock in a vitreous state forms the ceiling and walls of the underground cellar. The tavernkeeper, assisted by the professor, explains to Joe, in front of the barrels, the various types of wine the winery produces, before they arrive at two enormous obsidian amphorae. In there he ages his best wine, which he has named Hefaisteio, which means volcano in Greek. It is produced from a few vines that grow on a rocky spur of the Caldera Nuova not far from the eruptive mouth. The vines have been selected over the years to withstand the heating of the ground when the volcano's activity becomes more impetuous. It happens often and suddenly. His grandfather planted those vines to be able to produce a wine that, according to him, should have had the aroma of lava. To make the grape harvest, a man has to lower himself with ropes into a small terrace carved into the rock that remains constantly in the shade. The vines there grow and bear fruit thanks to the humidity that rises from the sea and condenses into a perennial dew. The rest of the caldera is barren and without any vegetation. The obsidian from which the amphorae are made comes from the island of Nysisros, another volcanic island a day's sail from Santorini. The aging of the wine in the obsidian allows the wine to develop an immediate but pleasant warmth in the drinker. This warmth makes the drinker an affable and relaxed person, even to the point of letting go. Joe, who has noticed a glint in Florakis' eyes and the professor's dilated pupils, asks the

tavernkeeper to replace the wine he has already served with Hefaisteio. The man replies that it is not possible because it has already been sold to rich gentlemen in Athens. That wine is one of the finest in all of Greece, and only the really rich can afford it. Joe asks for the price, and even Florakis is impressed by the enormity of the figure. Joe shows him his block of travel checks and waves him upstairs to sign one. The tavernkeeper rubs his hands together. When they are all seated at the table again, the first courses of lunch begin to arrive from the kitchen as the tavernkeeper brings jugs of his special wine. After an initial round of delicious dishes, the professor has washed down a couple of jugs of wine. Joe was right, underground, to assume that Florakis is someone who likes to drink. From the kitchen, new dishes begin to be sent out for a second round of courses, and, glass after glass, the professor becomes more talkative, less guarded, and finally, having taken off his jacket, totally at ease. Having finished eating, over coffee and honeyed sweets, Joe brings up the story of the seals again. Florakis, taken aback by the height of his inebriation, asks them to be quiet and not talk loudly about it. Then he pulls them all close to him and whispers that it is true that there are seals on Santorini, but it is a secret that everyone on the island jealously guards. He adds, suddenly becoming lucid, that this secret must remain that way. Florakis gets up from the table and says it is time to go. Joe pays the tavernkeeper, who makes him bow and scrape, and they take the cart back to Fira, the island's capital and their residence. The professor drives in silence, never saying a word. At one point, the carriage is on a stretch of road that runs down a steep escarpment to the sea. Frances asks to stop the carriage to admire the view. They get out and look at the archipelago. From afar, a cloud of vapor can be seen rising from the sea.

Frances inquires as to what it is and why they did not see it when they arrived by ship. The professor, a little uncomfortable, explains that there are volcanic springs in that part of the sea that, when in contact with water, form those vapors. They did not see them coming because, by regulation, the route in and out of the archipelago is to the north while the vapors are to the southwest of the inland sea arm. The ships do not pass close to that point. Suddenly, they hear a distant, seal-like call from below. They look over the cliff and spot a specimen. They turn towards the professor, and he, embarrassed, mumbles that it is difficult to see a seal on the main island. They are spectators at a very rare event. But Florakis insists that he cannot reveal anything more to them than what he has already said. They have to stop asking him questions on the subject. Back in the village, in front of the tavern, the professor hastily takes his leave, hands the reins back to the visibly tipsy carter, and leaves.

Set 5

They spend the evening commenting on the hike and looking out over the sea from their house's highest terrace. The moon illuminates the volcano's caldera, and clouds of vapor can be seen in the distance. The professor did not reveal much throughout the day, but Joe and the others have deduced something from his words. There are seals on Santorini, but they live neither on the main island nor on Thirasia. It is to be excluded that they are in the two calderas because with the ship they passed by them and did not see a soul. On the other hand, Anita was on her way to a friend of hers who, in Santorini, dealt with seals. They

deduce that there must be another island in the archipelago, and it is on this island that seals and, perhaps, Anita's friend live. Those sea vapors, whose importance the professor tried to play down, could be the very screen of the mysterious island. Frog wonders if it is possible to visit that place with a boat, and Joe replies that it does no harm to try. They return inside the house to consult the map of the archipelago. There is one hanging on a wall, but it doesn't appear to have the vapors' spot on it. However, Joe notices an unusual feature in the map. Upon closer inspection, Joe notices a part that appears to have been erased or at least inked over, precisely where the vapors should be. Joe and Frog decide to gather more information on the matter and leave the house to go to the harbor inn. After a few drinks, they ask the innkeeper about the hot springs, and the man tells them that the area is forbidden to visitors because poisonous vapors emanate from the waters. There are many fishermen who have not returned home because they have passed, by misfortune or chance, over that stretch of sea. This is why it remains off-limits to navigation. Joe wants to inquire more about the vapors and the invisible island that they possibly hide, but he hesitates due to his fear of being exposed. On Santorini, it is obvious that everyone is trying to hide the presence of the seals, and everyone knows that they are looking for them. If the people of Santorini discover that the outsiders have figured out a part of the place's secret, they would immediately silence them and feed them to the fish. They go home and talk about it with the others. If the stretch of sea where the vapors are released is off limits to navigation, they need a different map. A nautical one. The nautical charts mark even the smallest obstacle to navigation, so if a sea-spot is off-limits due to rocks or even an islet, they must indicate it. They must return to the harbor,

board a boat, locate the cockpit, and consult the navigational charts. They can't all leave because someone will notice their presence. However, Joe and Frog cannot go alone because they need someone to cover for them. Frances, possessing the ability to harness the forces of Nature, would prove invaluable if any complications arise during the process of entering and exiting the boat. Late at night, wearing dark clothes, Joe, Frances, and Frog enter the tunnel and find themselves at the harbor. No one is around, and the place appears deserted. Only lights are visible here and there on some of the ships at anchor, mostly cargo ships waiting to depart at dawn. The church tower chimes the hours. They don't have much time to find what they are looking for undisturbed because shortly before dawn, the fishermen will return with their caught fish, and soon after, the first buyers will join them. Within a short time after that moment, the harbor will once again teem with life. Among the many unattended boats, they notice a sailboat moored in the roadstead. A lot of seaweed has grown on the ropes that keep it attached to the jetty. Furthermore, various sea plants proliferate under the hull. Evidently, the boat has not been moved for some time. Perhaps it is abandoned or otherwise without an owner. They decide to try to board. The ship's edge is not far from the dock, so Frog, with a leap, climbs aboard and pulls a gangplank for Joe and Frances to get on. In the dark, the ship does not appear to be in bad shape. On board, they make their way to the control cabin, where charts and navigation documents are usually kept. In the moonlight, they search through various drawers and finally they find charts. In one of the maps, the location of the vapors is marked with an island. It also has a name: Aspronisi. Maybe that's the island where seals live. Frances gets an idea. She could raise the fog in the harbor and then get the right wind to blow

them to the island without being seen. They need just to pull up the anchor, open the sail, and let go of the moorings. All three agree to try.

Set 6

The fog slowly lifts in the harbor of Santorini, soon becoming very dense and thick. Joe and Frog pull up the anchor, unfurl the sail, and untie the ropes. A light but gale-force breeze blows them off the pier and into the open sea. The vapors get closer. Frog fears he will be poisoned, but Joe, who by now has realized that he has the power to look beyond the appearance of things and people, tells him to stay calm because those vapors are not deadly. Their mephiticity is just a myth to keep the curious away. They reach the vapors and discover themselves immersed in a strange cloud of non-toxic gas. It is actually invigorating. Suddenly, the ship starts to move slower than usual, as if it is no longer going with the wind. They look overboard and see hundreds of seals that have lifted the ship from below and are guiding it towards a small harbor that can be seen in the distance outside the vapors. Torches and braziers illuminate the landing dock. The ship, propelled by the carpet of seals, arrives at the landing. They drop anchor and land. On the pier, there is a woman waiting for them. Joe and Frog's surprise at seeing another one of Bison's diners is great. They disembark and relate to the lady who is coming to meet them. The lady, named Adonia, is dressed Turkish-style with wide silk trousers. The temperature there is higher than on the main island. The woman explains to them that there is a particularly mild temperature on the island that remains constant all year round. Gentle breezes

blowing in from within the archipelago and underground hot springs create that special microclimate, both inside and outside the sea. The winds and hot springs are also responsible for the fog that hides the island. This situation has persisted since the infamous events of 1761. Adonia demonstrates her knowledge of all three and informs them that she was anticipating their arrival. She has known since they left Sicily that they would come looking for her; she is chieftain of the Vikindian tribes of the Mediterranean. As she disembarks, Frances misplaces her foot, causing excruciating pain. Adonia approaches and asks to see her leg. She touches her badly healed fracture and remains pensive. She knew about Frances' accident but did not imagine it had been so disruptive. She asks them to follow her, saying that perhaps she has a solution. Meanwhile, the seals come in and out of the water in a flurry of splashes, scrambling for a fish or a place on a more comfortable rock. Adonia adds that since she knows they are looking for the horn, what she will show them will be mind-blowing. They ascend a flight of stone steps to reach a round opening in the rock, akin to the hole where a doughnut is filled with jam. In fact, the islet resembles the shape of a loaf of bread. On the way up, they pass a small Venetian-style villa with many outbuildings of a more distinctly Greek appearance. The buildings surround a pool of thermal water. Someone is bathing, while others stand around the pool reading and chatting. But from where they are, one cannot tell whether those figures are men or women, and what age they are. Before the staircase's end, there is a small terrace from which one can see the entire islet. Seals cover every square centimeter of rocks and beaches. They produce a loud noise as they continuously enter and exit the water. The last few steps lead up to what turns out to be the mouth of a cave. Almost

magically, the noise outside muffles and disappears as they enter. Once they have accustomed their eyes to the darkest light, they realize that they are in a cave full of amethysts. Indeed, they recognize that the island is a geode that has emerged from the volcano's lava, and the cave is none other than the crystalline part of the geode. Understanding their astonishment, Adonia informs them that the island is relatively new. It came to light with the eruption of 1761, together with the New Caldera. To be exact, it was ejected from the volcano when the Grand Druid emerged. The island is nothing more than the incadescent rock shell that ensnared Kellan beneath the lava. The volcano spat out both of them simultaneously. When this massive ball of lava landed in this arm of the sea, it hit the rocks below, shattering their tops and opening an underground mouth of the volcano on which it now rests. It is the lava below that, by heating the submerged part of the geode, produces the vapors that shield the island. The outer part of the enormous geode, on the other hand, cooled rapidly after the eruption, opening fissures on its solidified surface that eventually widened to reveal its crystallized interior. Frances asks her what is believed to be the reason behind Kellan's escape. Adonia sighs. Her family has Venetian ancestry. The family relocated to the Venetian Republic's Ionian Islands in the 15th century, following the Doge's appointment of her ancestor, a renowned admiral, as governor to protect the islands from Ottoman expansion. In fact, the Turks, at that time, had conquered mainland Greece and wanted to try to take also the islands of the Heptanese that, on paper, were difficult to defend. In fact, the 7 islands of the archipelago go from Corfu in the north, very close to Albania, through Ithaca and Zakynthos, which are in front of the Gulf of Corinth, to Kythira, which lies under the Peloponnese in the di-

rection of Crete. Her ancestors repelled the Ottoman offensives, and the islands remained under Venetian rule until Napoleon's French army arrived shortly after the conquest of Venice. Her surname is Maniadoros, but it is only the Greekized form of her real Venetian surname, which is Manidoro, i.e., golden hands. Because her family members, both male and female, possess powers associated with music and the ability to perform it. Her power, for example, is that of being able to transform anything into a musical wind instrument. As a demonstration, Adonia picks up a scallop shell from the ground, passes it through her hands, and out comes a bizarre ocarina. Adonia hands Frances the small instrument and asks her to play it. From the instrument, Frances unleashes celestial music that moves those present. Indeed, her power lies not only in creating wind instruments but also in making them capable of playing angelic tones. And that is not all. Regardless of the practical application of each Maniadoros' power in the field of music, they all share the fact that they have an absolute pitch and can learn, play, and compose music with innate skill. For example, when she went to primary school at the age of 6, she already knew how to read and write music while knowing neither the Latin nor the Greek alphabet. During the 18th century, a series of disastrous events occurred that greatly reduced seals throughout the Aegean. The proliferation of killer whales, particularly in that part of the sea, had greatly reduced the number of fish available for seals, which had begun to dwindle in numbers. The naval conflict between Russia and the Ottoman Empire hindered fishermen from venturing into the sea, as they feared potential attacks from Cossack pirate ships or bombardment by Russian warships. Santorini, until the Greek War of Independence, was under Ottoman rule, so any Greek ship or boat was to be considered a

hostile vessel by the Russians. As a result, food was scarce on the islands. In addition, drought and a series of climatically unlucky seasons had a severe impact on the production of olive oil, which is essential for cooking. The people of the Aegean therefore began to hunt seals for meat, fat, and oil. By mid-century, there were very few seals left, and Kellan, from the volcano, made his presence felt with tremors and quakes that became more threatening every day. In 1761, at the height of despair, the Kellan keeper of that time requested the horn to aid in the seals' recovery. The McAllan abbot at the time sent a Maniadoros in order to play it. It was a desperate attempt; the Vikindians knew it, but they decided to try anyway. Unfortunately, something irreparable happened. At the sound of the horn, the volcano awoke and began to erupt, expelling the blob of lava in which Kellan was imprisoned. The horn's music, not finding enough seals to absorb it, had broken the vibrational bond that held the Grand Druid captive. Once the volcano had subsided, the guardian, his ancestor, and other Vikindians examined the ejected ball of lava from the caldera, which, upon re-landing, had transformed into a new island. The lava mass's exterior had already cooled. They found no trace of Kellan on the new island, but they hoped he was still inside it. Maniadoros sounded the horn again, which opened the island's interior and revealed its contents. There was no trace of Kellan, but they realized that the cooled blob of lava had been shaped by the horn's music and had turned into a huge wind instrument with the same characteristics as the original horn, though less powerful. The Vikindians decided to give the Maniadoros custody of the island with the aim of using it to restore the seal population and reinvigorate the marine fauna. Since then, the seals have multiplied, and the waters of the archipelago are among the

most fishy in the Mediterranean. Over time, his family has built a collection of buildings on the island that serve to house the family and all those Vikindians who need healing. They arrive, receive various melodic treatments within the cave, and depart once their healing process concludes. But because the healing rhythms are very short, they don't stay very long. It was here that young Johanna was treated for her bad leg wound that Kellan gave her when he stole her sickle. Taigi, Frances's grandmother, was also brought to Aspronisi after being severely wounded in Argentina. And here Anita wanted to come to heal from the wound inflicted on her in Rome by the Druids. Frog inquires as to why, upon passing through them, he sensed an invigorating power emanating from the vapors protecting the island. Adonia smiles and replies that those vapors passing through the cave's crystals become thaumaturgic and have the power to improve people's health. On Santorini, islanders, if they are ill, are brought close to the vapors and immediately feel better. No one on Santorini has spoken to them about the seals because too many details would have brought them to the island, whose power must remain secret. If it were known what the cave is capable of doing, all hell would break loose, and any nation, any army, or any armed band would try to conquer it in order to take advantage of the beneficial powers that island is capable of generating. It would be the end not only of Aspronisi, but of the entire archipelago. A foreign invader would, at the very least, exterminate all the inhabitants of those islands and replace them with his own people. Adonia invites them to enter the cave. Although the light from the moon that night is rather dim, the interior of the cave, reflecting its glow, shines with color, illuminating it almost as brightly as day. Sea water occupies one side of the cave, reaching a depth of less than

a meter, while the other side remains dry. The pristine water reveals a floor covered in round pebbles. Adonia points Frances to a stone bench emerging from the water. It is there that patients sit and enjoy the healing vibrations of the cave. Frances inquires about the melodies utilized to generate these beneficial vibrations, to which Adonia responds that they are the melodies of the two archdruids. Sometimes they are played separately, sometimes merged into one music. Outside of institutional settings where archdruidic melodies are regularly played, only she, of all the Vikindians, is authorized to know and play those notes. However, their healing power is limited and only helps in cases that are not too serious, be they real illnesses or the consequences of minor accidents. Instead, for more serious cases, such as those involving Taigi or Johanna, one must use the notes of the horn melody. But it is not so easy. It is forbidden for anyone to transcribe those notes, just as it is forbidden to learn them by heart. In fact, since Kellan has been at large, all Vikindians who have anything to do with the horn and its melody are at risk. If the Grand Druid was aware that someone was familiar with those notes, it's highly probable that Kellan would attempt to kidnap that individual. Using his irresistible hypnotic powder, he could acquire the crucial knowledge of the secret melody, which, if he managed to obtain possession of the horn, would enable him to free Cathbad and the others. Having stolen Cork's manuscript is of little help to Kellan because he does not know the Cherokee. And Frances, the only one in his organization who knows this language, has not been with him to read it since Kellan had the illuminated codex stolen. The disappearance of the manuscript, however, was a disaster for her and her patients. Since she could not memorize the melody for security reasons, she had to ask the abbot of Cork for assistance

every time she needed it. When needed, Adonia sent a seal to Catania to the house of Pietro, son of Manfreda. His house overlooks the sea, and he has even built a platform on which the seals can easily climb. Pietro, having looked after and fed the seal, contacted his mother, who sent one of her raptors to the monastery in Cork. The abbot, seeing the raptor, copied the melody from the manuscript and, via a carrier pigeon, sent it to her. The pigeon, escorted by the raptor, would arrive on Mount Etna, where both birds would rest for a few hours before departing for Santorini. The whole thing lasted no more than two days. Once Adonia had finished using the melody, she would burn the transcription of the notes and send the pigeon and the bird of prey back to Manfreda. The pigeon, carrying a note for the abbot, would make another stop on Etna. Manfreda provided a new escort, and the bird returned to the monastery. The escort bird of prey, pampered and spoiled by the monks, would take a few days' holiday in Ireland before returning home. However, the absence of the manuscript has significantly diminished the cave's healing potential. And Frances would need that very melody to get herself back on her feet. The other music would have only a marginal effect on her. But Frances, to Adonia's surprise, is able to compensate for the loss of the manuscript. She still has Mario's note in her pocket, in which the notes of the horn melody have been marked. Frances hands it to Adonia, and the woman instructs her to walk to the stone bench. As walking with the stick in the water is difficult, Joe picks her up and carries her to the bench. When Frances is in position, Adonia retrieves two pebbles from the water, at which point it is evident that they are geodes as well. They resemble a miniature version of the actual cave. Adonia explains that their hollow interiors cause them to produce a sound when they roll. Frances,

Joe, and Frog do not understand. Then Adonia begins to tap the two geodes together, gradually creating a rhythm that becomes more and more engaging, so much so that Joe and Frog also begin to tap it with their feet. Slowly, a few seals swim into the cave, followed gradually by others. The seals, following the pace of the rhythm that Adonia gradually diversifies and makes more complex, begin to move the water in such a way as to create currents that make the stones roll along the bottom of the cave. As they roll, the geodes produce a melody: the melody of the horn. Initially, the sound is faint and barely audible, but with the addition of more seals, the music intensifies, engulfing the entire cave in its sound. Immersed in that melody, Frances begins to feel her leg on fire, and the pain that has accompanied her from Florence all the way there begins to subside until it almost disappears. When Adonia closes the concert and the seals return outdoors, Frances gets to her feet and realizes that she can do this without a stick. Joe asks her if he should go back and fetch her and bring her back to dry land, but Frances replies that there is no need and crosses the stretch of water that separates her from dry land without the stick. Adonia invites them to bathe in the moonlit thermal pool. The guests have all gone to sleep by now, so they have the place to themselves. They change in the changing room. Joe and Frog emerge, donning a white loincloth tied to a matching white sash. Men from North American tribes wear the same garment. On the other hand, the women wear a white two-piece swimming costume, which resembles the attire of girls from Amazonian tribes. While relaxing by the pool, Frances asks Adonia what exactly happened to Kellan for ending up a prisoner in Santorini. Adonia recounts. In the megalithic sanctuary of Lagrange, Ireland, on the night of St. John in 1251 of the Christian era, all the Druids gathered for the

annual plenary session of their order. At this assembly, Cathbad, arch-druid of the Earth Druids, spoke out against the disruption of the Druidic order and the merger of the two Druidic brotherhoods. Their priestly order had operated in this manner for hundreds of years, bringing success to the two peoples, Vikings and Celts, who had emerged from the role of barbarians to become the masters of Europe. Christianity did not worry him. The Druids would discreetly uphold their traditions and, naturally, infiltrate the Christian clergy to lessen their oppressive influence. And then, as a final weapon against assimilation, there was always the cauldron of that island whose name has been lost. Let us imagine how much Cathbad was opposed to collaborative relationships between druids and shamans. He abhorred the fact that the families of the Indian and European elites intermingled through the marriage of their children. In his opinion, doing so denatured the Nordic and Celtic populations. Above all, he did not want to share Druidic knowledge with Indian shamans. However, Cathbad found little support among the assembled druids. Most of the opposition Cathbad encountered came from Allan, the arch-druid of the Druids of the Stars, who had brought with him the majority of the Druids from both the Stars and the Earth, all of whom were determined to combine their knowledge with that of the Indians. And it was to Cathbad's surprise that, at a certain point of the heated discussion, before the start of the great ceremony that was to follow to foster the union of Heaven and Earth, Allan gave orders for American shamans to be brought in. Cathbad at that point was outraged, gathered a handful of loyalists, including his dolphin Kellan, and fled the place, taking the iron flute with him. Cathbad sailed towards the Mediterranean to arrive on the island of the Druids, which was deserted because everyone was

in Ireland. Once landed, Cathbad headed straight for the crater of the volcano with his followers. At that point, he made his intentions known to them. He was going to do what anyone was forbidden to do: play the melody of the Earth Druids backwards to unleash uncontrollable destructive forces. In this case, the reverse melody would have served to awaken all the spirits contained in the lava. These spirits of ancient Druids, stirred by the vibrations, would have agglomerated into a tough metal and poured over those present, giving them terrifying powers. This type of rite was passed down in secret from one archdruid to another, but only as a last resort if the Celtic and Viking peoples were faced with formidable danger. Not even in Roman times was it used. But now the very survival of the Druidic culture and the peoples who had embraced it was at stake. He asked his people if they were ready, and they said yes. He played his flute with such intensity and volume that the caldera began to boil, causing a column of glowing metal to rise from the crater and rain down upon the bystanders. Large masses of molten metal enveloped the archdruid and his men like an egg, within which the five druids began their metamorphosis. It took a few days for the metal to cool and for the beings inside to undergo the change of form. Upon finishing the festival in Lagrange and returning to the island, the rest of the Druids encountered five large blocks of solidified metal on the crater's rim. It was a metal they had never seen. But as soon as they touched the blocks, the metal vaporized into a cloud that appeared to be alive, forming five bodies of monstrous beings. These beings attacked and killed the druids present, devastating the island. And the iron flute was smashed to pieces in the destructive fury of these beings and thrown into the sea. The five beasts were furies whose sole objective was to destroy and kill entire communities

of Vikings, Celts, and Indians, destroying all traces of genetic contamination between the two continents and forcing Celts and Vikings to return to tradition. Was it then that druids and shamans met in Greenland? Question Joe. And why there? Adonia answers that the Vikings had an ancient settlement on that island. However, they faced challenges due to the harsh weather and the low productivity of the land, particularly in farming. The colony was dying because of the prohibitive living conditions there, even though the Inuit, their neighbors, were doing just fine. On the other hand, the Vikings had no desire to interact with the Inuit, learn their hunting techniques, or adopt their clothing, which was better suited to the Arctic cold than European attire. Allan, in choosing Greenland, wanted to show how not only uniting Druidism into a single practice but also merging with the natives could bring many benefits to all. Greenland would prove this. It took weeks to get the druids and shamans all there, but when everyone was present, the ceremony began. Allan began to play the ivory flute while the Indian shamans played their drums. After several rounds of wanige and long vibrational sessions accompanied by the sound of drums and flute, something unexpected occurred. A Vikindian caught sight of a strange phenomenon as he peered out the window. A golden vapor could be seen rising towards the sky from everywhere. The spirits of the Star Druids and shamans of the past were gathering above. The spirits of the shamans ascended to the sky from the grass, the stones, the rivers and lakes, the forests, and the prairies, while the spirits of the Druids emerged from their trees. In the sky, just above the place of the ceremony, an aurora borealis appeared and grew closer and closer until it was almost touchable from the ground. The aurora turned into a dry shower of cosmic dust

and enveloped the druids and shamans present. Meanwhile, the celestial spheres emitted an extraordinary melody that Allan was able to memorize. The Powers of Heaven had spoken. Once the ceremony concluded, everyone in attendance fell asleep, exhausted. They woke up different. Each of them realized they possessed an extraordinary power or ability, which they could enhance by coordinating with each other. Allan, on a makeshift stand, described the melody in runes using the Cherokee language so that few would be able to play it. The Vikings in Greenland, after these incredible events, not only proved Allan right, but they too converted to the new form of Druidism and shamanism combined together. They integrated with the Inuit and have prospered ever since, so much so that there is still a thriving Vikindian community on the island today. It is precisely because of what happened up there, that is, the union of the forces of Heaven and Earth and the fusion of the two Druidic-Shiamanic traditions, that mixed marriages between Celts/Vikings and natives are blessed by the birth of children with powers that can be passed on to the next generation. In short, it was in Gorenlandia that night that the Vikindians were born. After Cathbad's capture, Allan and his men went down to South America and imprisoned Artair, the dragon, in a remote volcano in Tierra del Fuego, where they had driven him to keep him as far away from his master as possible. Caging Taranis and Lugus was also relatively straightforward due to the constant eruptive nature of Etna and the widespread presence of active volcanoes in Iceland. Capturing Kellan was quite tricky. That monstrous metal orca he had transformed into brought death and destruction wherever he passed. Unlike his other companions, Kellan was the only one who had been able to get in tune with the biological orcas and drag them into his insane

destructive rage. That huge pack of orcas led by Kellan when they attacked an archipelago devoured fish, marine life, and human beings. People at sea died as the cetaceans sank their boats, seals and dolphins were gobbled up, and fish stocks dwindled so low as to destroy fishermen's income. Many islands were left starving after their passage. A volcano was needed to imprison the monsters, and Santorini with its still-submerged volcano was the ideal trap for an enormous killer whale. In 1251, at the center of the archipelago, only the old caldera of the volcano was emerging from sea. It was only a small island, although at least four times as large as Aspronisi. In the center of the archipelago, just in front of the old caldera, the fishermen of Santorini and all the neighboring islands made an almadraba with their boats and nets. Almadraba is an ancient Arab fishing technique used in Spain and Sicily to catch tuna. Basically, the fishermen drive shoals of tuna into a trap that consists of making them enter a large semicircle bordered by fishing boats with nets already positioned to form a cul-de-sac. The Vikindians managed to round up a pod of dolphins that would act as bait. The dolphins engaged with Kellan's horde, and the orcas chased them at enormous speed until they entered the archipelago. When the orcas were inside, a huge cluster of seals gathered from all over the Mediterranean and made sure they were followed by the hungry and ravenous killer whales into the middle of Santorini's inland sea and made their way into the trap. An exit point had been designed for the seals that closed immediately after their passage. When Kellan had also entered the trap, Allan, from the old caldera, began to blow the horn. Kellan and his crew, confused by the situation and stunned by the music, remained bewildered just long enough for the volcano to wake up. At that moment, the boats released their nets and, driven by the winds

generated by one of the Vikindians on board, hastily left the area to return to land. Kellan and his killer whales were now prisoners of the horn's melody and could no longer escape. Suddenly, a column of lava rose from the bottom of the sea, pulverizing the cursed orcas and enveloping Kellan in a globe of molten rock. The column of lava with Kellan at the top rose a hundred meters; then, just as suddenly as it had risen, the lava plunged forcefully back down to the bottom of the sea, dragging Kellan into the bowels of the earth. The old caldera was chosen as the place of residence of the monster's guardian and as a base for the seals that became the totem animals for guarding the prisoner. The orcas did not appear again, and the sea of Santorini became a paradise for seals but mostly for dolphins, who, in exchange for tranquility, helped the fishermen by accompanying them on their fishing trips and searching out the most fishy areas for them. A peace that was abruptly interrupted in 1761 by Kellan's escape. They ask her if she has ever met the Grand Druid in person. She answers yes, in South America. In 1839, on Johanna's instructions, Anita arranged for a false discovery of a Celtic monastic codex to be published in some South American newspapers. According to the articles, the illuminated manuscript recounted remarkable events that occurred in the mid-1200s. It contained the chronicle of an epic struggle of good against evil that pitted righteousness druids against evil druids. The story described volcanoes, frigid lands to the north, vast plains spanning across the sea, and an etherogenous bunch of terrifying animals imprisoned in various parts of the earth, each precisely described in its location. The newspapers, in order to capture the readers' attention, also emphasized the fact that the text told the story of an amazing gold artifact with extraordinary powers. And journalists announced that a well-

known South American cultural foundation was preparing to exhibit the manuscript to the public in the halls of the institute's library. The bait worked. With a band of his acolytes, the Grand Druid arrived in Buenos Aires and, at night, infiltrated the building that the newspapers said would host the exhibition shortly thereafter. But, once inside the main hall, the lights went on, and Kellan and his men were confronted by a platoon of Vikindian women all armed with sickles. Anita had gathered all the available women in America and Europe for the occasion, including herself, Taigi, and Johanna. Anita had thought of an all-women team because, knowing that the Vikindians observed and tracked the Vikindians and knowing the typical misogyny of the ancient Druids, she was sure that the setting out all at once of so many Vikindian women would not ring the alarm bells of Kellan's organization. Anita was right. The Grand Druid had shown up at the appointment without suspecting anything. Upon discovering the deception, the druids immediately armed their ouroboroi and unsheathed their obsidian daggers. The druids all rallied around Kellan to shield him and make his way out. For a quarter of an hour, all hell broke loose in the building. The druids responded blow by blow to the Vikindian assaults, as ouroboroi flew and a rain of fire descended from the ceiling. As the druids' ranks significantly thinned, Taigi Shifford seized the chance to attack Kellan from the side the pulverized druids had left bare. With her scythe, she managed to make a cut on Kellan's arm, but he was ready and responded with a masterful dagger strike that badly wounded Taigi. In the ensuing confusion, Kellan and his loyalists managed to get out on the street. Prior to his escape, Kellan created a crater in the street directly in front of the building's entrance to complicate the pursuit. The crater was, in fact, immediately filled with

water. Kellan had actually tried to cause an earthquake in order to collapse the palace and kill his assailants, but the power of Theo and Odette's mother, who was also present, to make any building indestructible, passed on to all others, made the palace as solid as a mountain. Taigi, severely wounded, was taken to Santorini to be healed with music from the cave before returning home. Unfortunately, we now know that the story of Buenos Aires did not end there. A year later, Kellan killed Taigi, and in 1848, it was Anita's turn. Joe would like to know more on the subject, but Adonia stops and asks where Frog has gone. Caught up in the story, no one has noticed his absence. They get out of the water and set out to look for him. They find Frog on the jetty playing with dolphins and seals. The seals, animals who are shy towards humans, not only do not bite him but even let him cradle and caress them. The dolphins, on the other hand, joke around with him by jumping out of the water and performing aerial acrobatics. Then, at one point, one of the dolphins approaches him and seems to invite him to go with them. Frog, who does not know how to swim, reaches out to the dolphin and caresses him while he stands near the dock to allow Frog to climb on his back. The boy plucks up courage and straddles the dolphin. In a burst of spray, Frog's dolphin takes off at full speed and joins the others who are already swimming towards the open sea. Adonia calls one of them back and advises him to keep the boy out of danger. The dolphin appears to nod its head and emit sounds in response before joining the rest of the pod. The dolphins take Frog on a circumnavigation of the island without ever leaving the protective vapor barrier. When they bring him back ashore, Frog has learned to ride the dolphins, as he knows how to ride horses. It appears as though he can comprehend their language. The hour is late, and it is time for Joe, Frances, and Frog to return

to the harbor before anyone notices the boat is missing. Joe and Frances board the boat, but Frog says he wants to stay a little longer to play with the dolphins. Adonia replies that there is no problem; they will take him home. Frances stirs up a breeze that swells the sails and propels the boat toward land. They pass the vapors and, without a sound, return to the city. The harbor remains empty, yet the distant voices of fishermen, en route to their jobs, fill the air. The tavernkeeper has already reopened for them to enjoy breakfast of sweet bread and Turkish coffee. When they emerge from the tunnel and arrive at the villa, they find Frog on the small private pier. He is greeting the dolphins who have taken him home. Frances, after her first experience in the cave, is definitely walking better. Her leg's painful wounds and lumpy bone reunions seem to disappear moment by moment. Adonia explained to her that the beneficial effects of the melody are not only immediate but will also be seen in the days to follow, but she will need a few more healing sessions to consolidate the results. According to Adonia, Frances will continue to limp at the end of the therapy, but she will no longer require a cane, and the pain she experiences when walking or standing will significantly subside, eventually becoming only a minor annoyance. At that point, they all agree to stay in Santorini for as long as Frances needs to recover.

Set 7

In the morning, Joe and Frances immediately return to the town to look for the professor and tell him about their adventure, but it seems that no one has seen him around for a few days. At the town hall, they reply that Florakis has left for Athens to attend a

scholars' symposium and will be away for several weeks. As the municipal employee is kind and helpful to them, they ask where they can rent a boat. The town clerk replies that the municipality owns a sailing boat that it keeps at anchor in the harbor. It is hardly used lately. It used to be used by the mayor or other officials of the municipality to travel through the archipelago, but now they have a motorboat, and so the sailboat is used to the bare minimum to keep it efficient. Joe describes to the man the boat they used the night before, and the clerk confirms that it is the one. If they want, they can take it and use it. There is nothing to pay as long as they keep it moving and keep it tidy and undamaged. Joe consents, signs the rental documents, and with Frances' assistance, they swiftly return with the boat to the villa, where they moor it in the private marina. They will only use it at night to reach Adonia without anyone seeing them. Frog, for his part, wants to continue practicing riding with dolphins or playing with seals. But only at nightfall so as not to be seen by anyone because the Druids can have eyes everywhere. The dolphins come to pick him up after dark and stay with him all night, bringing him back before dawn. Often, a group of seals accompany them. Frog, late in the morning, passes by the fish market just after sunset and collects all the fish scraps he finds to give to his friends who escort him around the archipelago.

Set 8

Every night Joe and Frances, often accompanied by Theo and Odette, go to Aspronisi with Adonia. She, in order not to reveal that she is back in possession of the horn melody, has dismissed all the guests at the healing center. Thus, in treating Frances,

no one notices that they are employing the horn melody. If word spread among the Vikindian people, it would create a pilgrimage to that place, blowing its cover and exposing it to Kellan's attacks. After Frances and Adonia have finished their session, they all go to dinner, and then whoever wants to, relax by the pool. During the day, Joe and Frances usually spend a lot of time together on the private beach in front of the house. They relax on two comfortable deckchairs and accompany each other with a glass of that Hefaisteio wine that the cellarman bottles for them and then delivers it to the tavern at the harbor where they pick it up. When Frances is alone with Joe, aware by now that she has been deceived by the Grand Druid, she tries to tell him about her life with the druids and with Kellan. The tattoo seems to have lost much of its power, perhaps thanks to the bracelet, and so she is free to tell. After her escape from home in 1851, 17-year-old Frances is taken to the London orphanage, where she discovers the true identity of her tutor, Terence. He is Kellan, the Grand Druid, about whom her grandmother told her when she was a child. However, from her perspective, it's not Kellan, the Grand Druid, who is the monster, but rather her parents and all the Vikindians. Frances is placed in the classes of her peers, and she finds the lessons fascinating. She is so committed that she becomes the best in her class and soon the first in the school. Not only is she strong in learning foreign languages and extraordinarily gifted at music, but she is also a fine warrior. Not even the boys can stand up to her. Frances, as an avid reader, one day, in the institute's library, recognizes on the title page of a novel, in the author's portrait, one of the Vichindian women who had shown up at her house after the funeral. One of those who, according to her, had covered up her grandmother's murder. It was Aiwory's portrait. Frances immediately communicates her

discovery to the Grand Druid. At that point, the Grand Druid offers her the chance to become a true druid and awaken her power. However, she must consent to be tattooed. She approves and receives the marking. Her military training is entrusted to Marlowe and O'Hara, while Kellan teaches her the Druidic part directly. Thanks to her grandmother and her family, Frances possesses the ability to read runes, speak Gaelic and Cherokee, and excels in playing the Earth Druid's melody, a skill that only the Grand Druid possesses and has taught only to her, making her a remarkable summoner of the elements. Her power slowly returns, but the tattoo perverts it. She can transform into any kind of woman, but randomly and not on command as she did with her grandmother. The biggest difference between her and the other druids is that she cannot be assilicated because that process doesnt'work on Vikindians. When Frances is ready, the Grand Druid tells her that they are going to punish Auwory for her role in the grandmother's affair. She is now a mature woman, dedicated to the arts and gardening. The only two of them together will easily subdue her. They go to Cork and storm the mansion. The plan is for Kellan to appear inside the woman's house, while Frances, positioned on a tree, will wait outside for the opportunity to use the ouroboros to kill her once the Grand Druid has forced her out into the garden. But the plan blows up. Auwory is skilled with her sickle and repels blow after blow the Grand Druid, who is pushed out into the garden. The Auwory pushes Kellan towards a flowerbed that she converts back to its original function, turning it into a well where Kellan falls in. Then everything returns to normal, trapping him inside. Frances then throws the ouroboros at her, which Auwory intercepts and pulverizes with her sickle. The Auwory looks up and makes eye contact with her before Frances takes off and

flees toward the harbor. Frances reunites with the Grand Druid days later in London. Surprised, she asks him how he managed to free himself. The Grand Druid replies that getting out of the underground is quite easy for him, although it takes him some time. In Cork, it took him longer than expected. But when he returned to the surface, he found no one in the garden or in the house; the Aiwory had fled. He was also on the ferry that Frances took to return to England. He had chosen to remain anonymous in order to observe her from a distance. Kellan gives her credit for keeping a low profile and sticking to the plan. Unfortunately, he has terrible news for her. He shows her the Times from a few months earlier, where, in the business pages, it announces the death of Mr. Higgins and his son, who died in a devastating fire that burned down the family mansion. The eldest son, taking over from his father, asked Frances' father to become a senior partner in the company. This is proof that her father is a murderer who will do anything to achieve his material ends. Not only did he kill the grandmother, but he also killed her beloved. Frances, after this news, becomes even more infuriated against the Vikindians and trains and studies so hard that, within a few years, she is appointed headmistress of the orphanage and boarding school and is in charge of the education of all pupils: young and old. She is a truly competent directress and under her direction, the Druids become even more superlative warriors and strong Vikindian haters. The Grand Druid also uses Frances as a smokescreen when he goes to circumvent the Vikindians in order to tattoo them. Joe remembers his cousin Birgid's words and then asks her what happened to those Vikindians, but Frances does not know this. When Kellan needed her, he would summon her and tell her the day of departure and the part she would have to play in order to choose a suitable wardrobe

for the mission. Frances did not even know the destination until she was on site. The Grand Druid took great care to conceal the existence of his organization, opting to travel on ordinary steamers or stagecoaches and, if they were far from any Druidic residence, to sleep in anonymous hotels. She had portrayed for him various characters such as a young prostitute, an elderly beggar, a mother concerned about her son, and an alcoholic lady of high society. When Kellan had convinced the Vikindian, man or woman, to follow him, he dismissed her and ordered her to return to London immediately. She has never seen those Vikindians who decided to follow the Grand Druid again, and she has no idea what happened to them. After each of these missions, however, the constant was that the Grand Druid would stay outside London for several weeks and return with crates of brand new ouroboroi. Only one word Frances had managed to pick up from conversations between the Grand Druid and Marlowe or O'Hara: the word 'ottoman'. But she had never understood what it meant. Joe, however, recalls that his father had won at Ascot by racing for a racing stable called octoman-something. In 1859, as Frances strolls through London, she passes by the Globe Theatre, where a crowd of fans is clamoring for the autograph of an actor who is still dressed as a Shakespeare character. Frances recognizes on the fly the face of the man who led the troop of men who had taken away her grandmother's corpse and dumped it—who knows where. Frances approaches the huddle of people and asks who the man was that everyone was asking for his autograph and is told that it was none other than the legendary actor Henry Bless. Frances reports her discovery to the Grand Druid, who devises a plan to exact revenge by killing him in the theater. The Grand Druid manages to get Hamlet's sheet music for the orchestra, and

Frances learns the solo flute part to perfection. Immediately afterward, Russell presents himself to the theatre management with Frances and offers Mr. Rees, the impresario, a generous sum of money if he hires her as the second flutist for Hamlet. Frances performs a short melody from the show that convinces him of her musical ability. Moreover, the theatre is old and in great need of funds for renovation, so Rees hires Frances without much hesitation, and from that very day she begins rehearsing with the rest of the orchestra and the cast.The day before the premiere, an unexpected incident happens to the soloist. As her carriage journeys to the theater for the dress rehearsal, a druid lurking in the shadows opens a chasm beneath the road. The carriage, caught in the sinkhole, shatters into pieces The musician emerges alive but with a broken shoulder and a serious fracture in her pelvis. Druids under the leadership of the Grand Druid, disguised as paramedics, rescue her and transport her on a stretcher to a discreet London clinic. The tattooed doctor is responsible for the well-being of the Ottoman's staff. In fact, the clinic has Ottoman's employees as its only patients. At the clinic, the Grand Druid tattoos the flautist to make her confirm Frances' story. Meanwhile, Frances arrives at the theater, stating that the flautist sent her as a replacement due to the accident. Bless inquires about the flautist's hospitalization, and he dispatches a messenger to verify her condition and validate Frances's referral. An hour later, the messenger returns, confirming that the musician, now completely immobilized in a full-body cast, endorses Frances. From that moment on, no one has heard from the woman again because Kellan first made her work as a music teacher at the orphanage and then assilicated her by turning her into one of his warriors. Frances gives a flawless dress rehearsal, receives compliments even from Bless, and is

cast in the part. The next evening, at the premiere, Frances attempts to kill the actor with the ouroboros. But at that chaotic juncture, she has no time to ascertain the result of her action and no time to retrieve the ouroboros. Regardless of the outcome of the assassination attempt, the Grand Druid has instructed her to head straight to Florence and await his arrival there. Frances has a one-way ticket to Italy in her pocket, and her luggage is already waiting for her on board a steamer bound for Livorno. So Frances runs to the port and embarks at night. The next day, at dawn, the steamer sets sail for the Mediterranean. Frances, during the technical stopover in Marseille, buys an English newspaper, and the news of Bless's death appears on the front page in large headlines. On the train from Livorno to Florence, sitting in first class, Frances spots another of the women who was involved in what she believed to be the murder of her grandmother. The train conductor is very obsequious towards the woman, who, from her clothes and jewelry, looks like a noble and rich lady. In this circumstance, Frances does not need to ask anyone the woman's name. It is the train conductor himself who, amidst a thousand scoffs, apostrophizes her as Princess Elisa Bonaparte. Hence the plan: to try to kill her too. Luckily she didn't succeed, sighs Frances, but she feels sorry for Bless. Joe then reveals to her that Bless is alive and, somehow, for who knows what reason, has faked his death. He and Frog have met him in person on at least three occasions. Frances is relieved.

Set 9

One morning, from the ferry steamer, the Grand Druid disembarks at Santorini, accompanied by Russell, Marlowe, and

O'Hara and no one else so as not to arouse too much curiosity. The signal that Frances' tattoo emits is faint, but it certainly comes from this part of the Aegean. They had lost track of her in Taormina, but it had not been difficult to realize that the road to Catania, renovated and with no more potholes, could not have been the work of Bourbon soldiers or Garibaldians. There was bound to be Frances' hand in it. Arriving at the port of Catania late in the morning, they had missed the departure of all the passenger ships that sailed in the morning, including the one on which Frances had boarded. But on questioning the dockers and persuading them to talk with some precious stones or gold coins, Kellan had discovered that a group of Garibaldians, including a dark-skinned boy, had embarked at dawn on one of the ships serving the eastern Mediterranean. Kellan and his men had combed all the larger Greek islands after Malta: Crete, Rhodes, the Dodecanese, Naxos, Paros, and Milos, but without success. However, as they approached Santorini, the tattoo signal became a little less faint. Kellan was at first recalcitrant to the idea of returning to his old island prison, but, crushed by the force of the evidence, he was compelled to break all ties. The Grand Druid shudders when he sets foot on the island that had held him prisoner. First, he goes to the town hall's clerk who finds for him and his entourage a villa on the plateau with a view of the sea, from which one can see clearly the New Caldera that was formed when Kellan emerged from the lava. Kellan passes himself off as a wealthy English businessman looking for a quiet, sunny place to rest from the business stress of the London Financial District. A few days later, Professor Florakis shows up at the gate of the villa. The reason for his visit is the same as always and that is that a retired academic like himself, bored by the islanders, looks to the cultured visitors

for an opportunity to talk about something interesting. He is an archaeologist and knows all about the island's past. Kellan orders his people to let him in. When the professor is in front of him, the Grand Druid immediately looks for signs that the man is a Vichindian. But flowers and plants do not seem to respond, so Kellan is reassured that the man is not his enemy and does not know who he is. The Grand Druid considers on the spot whether to tattoo him or not but opts not to as such a guy is not really useful to him in the long run. Nevertheless, the professor knows the place and its past, of which Kellan has also been a part, so he could, in the moment, be a valuable source of information. The Grand Druid begins a long chat about the island's history, and Florakis unleashes his repertoire of anecdotes and stories from ancient Greece, the long Venetian rule, and the Turkish conquest. When the professor finishes his narration, Kellan starts asking him questions about the eruption of 1761, the disappearance of the seals from the archipelago, and the strange vapors seen in the distance, and Florakis shows that he is uncomfortable enough to evade the questions. At one point the professor tries to leave on the pretext of a forgotten appointment, but the Grand Druid becomes threatening, and his thugs appear. They pin the professor to the chair he was sitting on, and Kellan pulls out a sack and blows his hypnotic powder into his face, which sends Florakis into a state of sensory alteration. The same technique Kellan had used on Frances' parents. The Grand Druid pulls out his flute and begins to play the melody of the Archdruids of Earth. When the professor is hooked by the notes, the attention of his deeper self aligns with Kellan, who, as a final move, blows some more dust into his face. Florakis begins to narrate. He reveals to him the existence of Aspronisi, the healing powers of the island, the seals that protect it, and Adonia, who is the

guardian of that place. Kellan also wants to know if there are other foreigners on the island and if, with them, there is a woman who is limping. The professor answers yes, and that this woman is with two others who do not leave her for a moment, and then there is an American and a boy who is dark-skinned but not Mediterranean. Kellan wants to know where they reside, but the professor, exhausted by the hypnotic power, falls into a deep trance and vegetates as if unconscious. Kellan concludes that nothing more can be gained from him. Marlowe and O'Hara ask their boss if they should kill the Greek. Kellan replies that he is very tempted by the idea but making him disappear would create havoc in the small island community and risk drawing the authorities' attention to them. On Kellan's orders, the professor is loaded onto a carriage and left to sleep under a tree a few kilometers further along the main road. He is found by a carter who, worried, had stopped to see if everything was OK. Florakis wakes up and says he does not remember anything. He climbs into the cart and is taken to town, where, at the port, he boards the last ferry of the evening. Kellan and his men now know that Frances is in Santorini, but they have no way of knowing where she is. The Grand Druid has realized that there is something blocking psychic contact with her and that, almost certainly, the malfunctioning of the tattoo is due to some dirty trick of those damned Vikindians. Nevertheless, the island is small, and, no matter how well Frances hides, he will find her sooner or later. O'Hara proposes to attack Aspronisi, as they have already done on Etna, and force Adonia to reveal everything she knows. But the Grand Druid rejects the idea. Even summoning all his forces from Nysiros would not succeed in taking possession of the islet. Adonia's powers and the island's ability to sound like the horn would, at the very least, shatter

daggers and ouroboroi, and then Adonia, with her scythe, could easily get the better of them. Not to mention that there might be other Vikindians in Aspronisi, for no doubt the Vikindians make extensive use of that thaumatugic cave. An assault like the one in Sicily is therefore militarily unfeasible because it would jeopardize Kellan's cover and would reveal to the Vikindians the existence of the Nysisros druidic base, not far from there, and it would uncover the real business of the Ottoman Company and the ramifications of the entire druidic network of which, it is clear, they know nothing about. Kellan instructs his men to keep an eye on the archipelago from the top of the cliffs that drop sheer into the sea. The objective is only to find out where Frances is and not to take her back. Frances will be followed at a distance until she leads them to the horn, then her fate will be decided. While Marlowe and O'Hara scrutinize the archipelago, the Grand Druid, each day, takes a hired carriage to visit a different place and ends up getting to know every landscape and village on the island. But days pass by, and they find no trace of Frances and the Vikindians. Kellan then decides to stir things up a bit and see if he can bring them out into the open. At night he has his people escort him to a cliff at the easternmost tip of Santorini. The Grand Druid stands a few inches from the cliff overlooking the sea and, with his flute, plays a muted melody that is lost in the sea breeze.

Set 10

The next morning the whole island is in turmoil. The fishermen, returning to port, have spotted a pod of killer whales that has entered the bay, and it's clear to those who know of their

existence that both seals and dolphins are at risk. It is Theo and Odette who bring the news back to the villa. They had left home early to buy fresh bread for breakfast, but the commotion at the harbor had drawn their attention. Frances does not take long to reconnect the orcas to Kellan and warn everyone that the Grand Druid is on the island. For a few days now, in fact, she has been feeling strange and weaker than usual. It must be his presence. Manfreda's armband shields her from Kellan's power but not completely. It is decided that Frances will barricade herself in the house with Theo and Odette while Joe and Frog will go to the town hall to borrow the motorboat and go to see how Adonia and the seals are doing. Joe and Frog show up at the town hall and go straight to the town clerk. Joe is determined to tell him everything and even blow their cover. But when they enter the building, there is no need to say a word. The clerk was waiting for them and already had the keys to the boat ready to hand to them, confirming that the problem is Kellan's work. At first they are a little confused by the words of the man they thought was a stranger to the Vikindian world, but then, looking closely at the whole structure, they notice that it is overflowing with fresh flowers and healthy plants. Joe and Frog make their way to the dock where the mayor's boat is moored. They cast off the lines, start the engine, and set off at full speed towards Aspronisi. The scene is also observed by Marlowe and O'Hara with their powerful binoculars. Both, although far away, recognize the American and the little Indian. They immediately run to warn their leader that the Vikindians have come out into the open. Kellan gives orders to take him immediately to the lighthouse of Akrotiri, which is on the southern tip of the island overlooking Aspronisi and is not too far from the villa. Marlowe asks if they should also carry the regenerated meteoric iron flute with

them. The Grand Druid replies no. He is not an archdruid, and the ouroboros embedded in the flute would prevent him from playing it. Only when the ivory flute is also ready will he be able to do so because he will combine the two pieces without the ouroboros from the two flutes and will assemble a flute that he will be able to play. At the lighthouse they found one of the Druid ships stationed on Nysiros. The Grand Druid, via the tattoos, had alerted the island's garrison to send him naval support, and the orcas departing for Santorini had marked out a course for the ship. Kellan climbs aboard and orders his sailors to take him a little further out to sea, halfway between the coast and Aspronisi. When the boat is in position, the Grand Druid plays with his flute the melody of the Earth Druids in reverse, and after a while the orcas appear near the keel of the ship. The Grand Druid almost seems to be talking to them even though communication is by telepathy. Kellan reveals to the orcas the location of the hidden island and authorizes them to go on a seal-feeding spree. He wants to punish the slim marine mammals for being his former captors. Then they are to take care of the tiny human but not kill or feed on him. They are to bring him back alive. Kellan's intention is to kidnap Frog, tattoo him, and find out what he knows about the horn and the Vikindian. His disappearance would also add emphasis to the search for Joe, who, strangely enough, had been stranded on the island for too long. Joe and Frog land in Aspronisi and find Adonia, who says she is worried about the situation. In fact, everyone in Santorini knows that those orcas are evil. They are a pod that infests that part of the Mediterranean, particularly further east towards Nysiros. They never move from their territory, so something must have happened, and even Adonia is leaning towards the hypothesis that Kellan has arrived on the island. As

they study what to do at the edge of the pool, the cry that seals make when they are under attack rises from the cliff. They run to the parapet of the terrace and see that the orcas are threatening the seals and trying to bite them. The water is red with blood, so they have already eaten a few seals. Frog has an idea. The dolphins will now have taken refuge in the open sea after seeing the orcas. Frog asks Joe to take him by boat out of the vapors from where Frog will call the dolphins. Then he will jump on one of them, and, with the pod, they will try to lure the orcas out of the archipelago. Meanwhile, the attacks on the seals become more intense, and there is no more time to linger. The two of them take the boat back as the dock is on the other side of the island, and so it has not been attacked by the orcas. When they are offshore, Frog manages to round up the dolphins and, on one of them, leads the pod back to the island and then, from there, distracts the cetaceans. From his ship, the Grand Druid observes the scene. He was expecting such a move from the boy. So he plays the flute again, and the orcas rearrange themselves so that they are the bait and guide the dolphins towards the trap set by the druids. The orcas leap and cut the dolphins off, pushing them towards the druid craft until they pack them and squeeze them against the ship's keel. At that point a net falls on Frog and imprisons him. Unceremoniously, the burden is pulled up awkwardly, and Frog is dumped on deck. Immediately, Marlowe and O'Hara tie him up and take him below deck. The Grand Druid thanks his orcas and gives them permission to eat the dolphins and return to Nysiros. The orcas do not take it back and slaughter Frog's friends. Then, the ship, with full sail, sets sail again towards Nisyros. Joe on the boat has lost sight of Frog and the dolphins because that small motorboat is rather slow when it has to go against the current. His attention is attracted

by a flock of seagulls that, super-excited, fly in and out of the water furiously. Slowly Joe reaches the arm of the sea where the gulls are squawking and finds blood everywhere and pieces of dolphin meat floating on the water. That's what attracted the seagulls. Of Frog, the orcas, and the Grand Druid, there is no sign.

9

Chapter 9 - Ganja

Set 1

Kellan's ship arrives at Nysisros escorted by the killer whales who, on the way, thank the Grand Druid with great jumps for the feast of seals and dolphins he granted them at Aspronisi. Frog spends the entire journey standing on the deck, tied to the mainmast. As soon as they land on the island, they are greeted by Wayne, who informs the Grand Druid that the walrus tooth has arrived a few days ago. Kellan immediately wants to see it, so he orders his men to take Frog to his private room and instructs Wayne to do the same with the tooth. In Kellan's chamber, Frog is gagged and tied to a chair. The Grand Druid looks at the walrus tooth and assesses the ivory in front of the Indian boy. He is satisfied: that ivory tooth is of the highest quality. He then asks Marlowe to hand him the half-ivory flute. Frog recognizes the artifact. The Grand Druid approaches him and shows it to him up close. Kellan, in particular, wants to

show him the corroded ouroboros. Then he also asks for the regenerated iron one and shows him the shape that the oxidized pile of metal originally had. Kellan tells Frog that those two half-flutes they had stolen from him in Cork were indeed two halves of the flutes of the Archdruids. The iron one, therefore, can only be Catbad's while the ivory one is definitely Allan's. Also because, after the golden horn, no new exemplars of those flutes had been reconstructed, and, according to his investigations, there were no more archdruids after them. The flutes were exclusively the dowry of the Archdruids, who were the only ones authorized to use them. They were also the only ones who knew the two sacred melodies that activated their powers. But he, Kellan, thanks to his prodigious musical memory, had learned them both by heart and could play them even with his eyes closed. The Grand Druid takes his flute and begins to play the two melodies together in reverse. At one point, the earth begins to shake, causing dust to fall from the roof, as thunder echoes in the sky. Frog is terrified. The Grand Druid then stops playing. This was just a demonstration of the power of the two melodies played together in reverse, even though they are played through a flute that is all of a piece and has no ouroboros encrusted. The power of the original flutes is much more prodigious. In fact, the two original flutes were two-piece instruments with interchangeable pieces: ivory with iron and iron with ivory. Ivory, which is animal bone, comes from the earth, so its vibrations resonate with the sky, while meteoric iron, which comes from the sky, vibrates to evoke the forces of the earth. The two flutes both had identical ouroboroi mounted on them. The ivory one has it in the mouthpiece, while the iron one mounts the ouroboros in the foot joint. The two ouroboroi are identical in appearance but of different manufacture: bronze,

for that of the ivory flute and indium for that of the iron flute. Indium is not found in nature but is obtained as a by-product of processing bronze and other metals. It was in the ancient forges of Nisyros that the Druids discovered indium which, being lighter than bronze and possessing many more properties, was chosen as the metal for the ouroboros to be set into the ivory flute of the Archdruid of the Earth. When the flutes were played by the archdruids, they caused the two ouroboroi to vibrate, creating a powerful wave of plasma all around the player, and as the flute made the music go, this bubble expanded until it rose to the sky or poured into the bowels of the earth. This was how the archdruids summoned the Forces of Nature or the Forces of Heaven. None of the archdruids had ever swapped flute pieces, nor, even if they had had the flute chimera in their hands, would they ever have played the other's melody on it along with their own. Because very powerful astrotelluric forces would have been activated that only a select few humans were able to keep at bay. Anyone else who had done so, even an archdruid, could have caused a mountain to suddenly collapse or made hailstones as big as cannonballs rain down without having any control over the situation. If then those two melodies together, played with the flute combined, had been played backwards, all hell would have broken loose. Kellan shows Frog the regenerated iron flute and then places it next to the walrus tooth. He will also make an exact copy of the original ivory flute, set an indium ouroboros into it—he can produce that metal at will—and then join the pieces of the two flutes, removing the ouroboros that prevents non-archdruids from playing them. He will then have an exceptional weapon at his disposal to recover the horn, free Cathbad, and, with the horn and the two flutes, destroy the Vikindians. Frog swallows some saliva.

Then Kellan addresses those present. When the two pieces are brought together, they will be aroused by the vibrations of the melodies in reverse, combine their electromagnetic power, and send the time-space of all who hear its music into a tailspin. At that point, friend or foe, whoever is inside that space-time bubble is at the mercy of the player, that is, Kellan, who is the only one who can play, and his druids, who, being semi- or almost completely assilicated, will be immune. Already with that instrument alone in his hands, the Vikindians would have their hours counted. The Grand Druid changes the subject and tells Frog that he is impressed. He is amazed that a Cherokee boy, coming from a landlocked people, can so naturally control the animals of the sea. He even manages to mount them. This is not a faculty one learns by hunting bison with a bow and arrow. Therefore, there is another factor at play. Kellan removes Frog's gag and asks him who his parents are and if, by any chance, he is an Indo-European bastard. Frog replies that he never knew his parents because they died when he was a child. But he knows that his father served as a hunter and a warrior, and his mother was a squaw much loved by the tribe. He has no white relatives. Then how come he can ride dolphins? Kellan insists. Frog replies that he does not know, but it is not too different from riding a horse. He excels at it. Kellan remains unconvinced. What the boy has is necessarily a Vikindian's power. But his appearance is that of a redskin. And the plants do not seem to green up with his proximity. Now, however, the moment of truth has come, and Kellan orders his acolytes to prepare the boy for tattooing. He has never tattooed one of these American Indians, so Kellan is curious to test the effect. When Frog is in position, the Grand Druid takes his arm and emits the usual wave of light and heat. The tattoo imprints itself

on the boy's skin as it does on everyone else's, but, unlike the others, it strangely does not pulse or move when Kellan is near. Frog, although he feels the tattoo on his skin, realizes that it does not work on him. In all the time he has spent observing Frances, he has understood very well the effect that that tattoo has on people. This type of influence is not present within him. Frog nevertheless decides to pretend that the tattoo works on him and thus will deceive the Grand Druid into believing that he has the boy in his power. On the other hand, Frog does not have many alternatives: he is on a fortified island full of druids; there is no telling how far the island is from the mainland, and he has no way of contacting anyone who can save him. He has no choice but to feign and wait for the right opportunity to escape. Strangled by the bizarre behavior of the tattoo on Frog, Kellan seeks proof that it is working. He then asks Frog where Frances resides in Santorini. Frog immediately has the answer ready. During his dolphin rides in Santorini, he had noticed a large and stately yacht anchored for days in the open sea near the archipelago. Using this information, he deceives Kellan by claiming that Joe, him and the others are hiding there. Kellan then asks why Frances' tattoo no longer works. Frog replies that it has been removed. Kellan does not understand, and then Frog asks if he knows about Adonia. He replies that he does and then tells him that it was the power of Adonia and the stones of the island that managed to crumble it. The Grand Druid goes into a furious rage. He summons O'Hara and Marlowe to ask them about that yacht off Santorini to which Frog referred. They affirm that they have observed and monitored it, albeit from a considerable distance. It flies the Danish flag but also has the diplomatic flag hoisted. Apparently it belongs to the royal family of Denmark. The ship's flower-covered deck means

Vikindians are on board. The ship is heavily guarded by men probably armed with sickles as well as rifles and cannons and is unapproachable without alerting the sentries. The fact is that the ship is strategically anchored so that it is difficult to spy on it, as it can only be observed from a great distance. While one can see suppliers and guests coming and going, one cannot see who is getting on and off. Therefore, it is not surprising that Frances and the others hide there. At these words, the Grand Druid believes he has found confirmation that Frog is in his power. He dismisses him by ordering a druid to show the boy to his quarters. In the first days of his imprisonment on the island, Frog discovers that he is not a prisoner in his room but is free to go wherever he wants. The tattoo, while not working, does not crumble or fade, and the Grand Druid, thanks to Frog's shrewd pretense, believes he has the boy in his power. Frog, as far as acting is concerned, has learned a lot from reading Shakespeare and thus manages to dramatically but believably simulate his role as a tattooed man. However, Frog is not allowed to ask questions or interact with the servants, the men of the garrison, or the rest of the druids. Moreover, the fishing village is off-limits to him, and he is obviously forbidden to go near the sea. On the other hand, Frog doesn't even think about asking questions and snooping around suspiciously. He does not want to drop his cover because he knows that the alternative would be death. As he stalks around the island, the Indian boy mentally notes down every bastion, cannon, and gunpowder store in order to make a mental map of the layout of the island and its defenses. In a few days, Frog knows Nysiros like the back of his hand. And then he realizes escaping the island is impossible. Neither is it possible to warn the others on Santorini because the island is patrolled by a large pod of orcas that keep

cetaceans and marine mammals away, so there are no dolphins around to help him escape or to carry a message to his friends. Unable to make any attempts to escape, Frog spends most of his time in the stables, among the animals he loves. He helps the stableboys feed the horses, groom them, and move them around the gallop. The druids take turns practicing their horsemanship. Frog, who rides with them without uttering a word, surpasses them in dexterity and agility. The Grand Druid is aware of this boy's peculiar talent and believes it could be useful someday.

Set 2

Several days after his arrival on Nysiros, Frog notices a ship approaching the harbor that is not one of those stationed on the island. From the ship disembarks a delegation of imperial eunuchs dressed in the Turkish style who are received by the Grand Druid with great pomp and honors. The delegation stays on the island for the night and sets sail the next day. Once the foreign ship has set sail again, within a few hours, there is a coming and going of ships at the island's military port and a coming and going of crates from the Grand Druid's residential complex. The crates arrive empty and leave full to be loaded onto a ship. When the ship seems to be loaded to capacity, Frog is summoned by the Grand Druid. Kellan instructs Frog in the reception hall to prepare the best fifteen horses of the garrison for boarding. His duties include caring for their food and bed straw. Frog, wishing to not betray his curiosity that could arise suspicions because tattooed druids are not curious at all, asks the Grand Druid how long the horses will remain

on the ship so that he can calculate the amount of fodder to be embarked. Kellan replies that it will take them a couple of days to reach Constantinople, where they will stop for a few hours. Then they will sail for another day to Trebizond, where they will disembark and proceed by land. Frog, determined to find out more, asks him if he should also prepare the saddles and harnesses, but Kellan replies that there is no need and that the stable boys will take care of that. Frog goes to the stables where the Druid stableboys already know what to do thanks to Kellan's instructions that came to them via tattoo. Frog calculates how much fodder and oats 15 horses will need for a week and then gives instructions to one of the stable boys to prepare the required amount. Meanwhile, he and a carter load onto a wagon the bales of straw that will be used to prepare the stables in the ship's hold. When the wagon of fodder and the wagon of straw are fully loaded, Frog climbs on top of one while the carters set the horses in motion to head for the harbor. While on the wagon, Frog tries to get information from the driver. But he remains silent as a tomb for the entire journey. Once at the port, Frog and other Druids unload the wagon and load the straw bales into the hold. After arranging and preparing the stable, Frog notices, as he disembarks from the ship to return to his residence, that some stablemen are bringing saddles and harnesses for war, not parade. So Frog concludes that the horses will be used for a dangerous mission, not a parade in a festive town. The following day, Frog receives an order to supervise the transportation of the horses to the harbor and, with the assistance of the other stable druids, to board them individually. Frog goes to the stables, has the horses rounded up in the yard, and, having climbed onto the back of the most powerful stallion, leads the herd towards the embarkation. When the last animal

has also been placed in the hold, Frog, as per his orders, goes to report to Kellan. Frog finds him giving final instructions to the garrison commanders. When the boy finally receives attention, the Grand Druid informs him that he, his staff, and a large group of Druid warriors are leaving for the capital. Frog will go with them, so he should quickly gather his belongings and be ready to embark on the dock in half an hour. As Frog exits the room, he spots an unopened box on a table, containing the walrus horn. It's clear that they will also be taking that object with them.

Set 3

After a few days of sailing, Kellan and his companions enter the Golden Horn of Constantinople and disembark directly at the private dock of the Tower of Galata, where Wayne and Russell are waiting for them. As a pasha of the empire, Kellan dresses richly, while his Druids dress as authentically as possible in Ottoman attire. Frog has also donned Turkish-style clothing to resemble a page of the pasha. The ship is not unloaded, and the horses are not disembarked either. But there is already a carriage ready and waiting for them to leave with an escort of druids on horseback from the tower garrison. The soldiers on horseback form a procession in front and behind the carriage once Kellan and his retinue mount it, escorting The Grand Druid, Frog, Russell, and Wayne to the royal palace. The sultan receives them quickly upon their arrival at the Topkapi. Frog records everything that happens while pretending not to understand anything. The Sultan and the Druid speak in Turkish, but there is an interpreter who translates into English for the two British officials. Not knowing Turkish, it is by listening to the interpreter that Frog

understands the subject of the conversation. The Sultan explains to the pasha the reason for his summons to court. The Khan of Ganja, a region of Azerbaijan, had undertaken to build a mausoleum to commemorate the many martyrs who had fallen for Islam in the various wars against Russia. The Sultan had offered to pay at his own expense for the construction of the golden dome that would tower above the building. But the khanate's recent victory in repelling the Russian offensive changed his mind, and he built a mausoleum whose dome will be the largest in Islam. The Sultan's pledge to gild the dome remains, but 50 times more gold is needed than would have been needed for the original project, and this would put a strain on imperial finances already burdened by current and coming conflicts. The Sultan calls the Grand Vizir, who shows the three the plans for the building. The best architects, cabinetmakers, and goldsmiths in Islam have been hired to build it. The problem is the amount of materials needed to adorn the dome. The original design called for 12 kilos of gold, but the new design calls for 250 kilos. That is why the sultan sent him an embassy to ask him to procure that amount of precious metal. He is the Pasha with the most gold in the empire and can therefore meet the commitment on behalf of the Sultan. The Pasha shows himself honored by the task and in fact has with him the amount of gold that was requested. Wayne shows the Ottoman's bank receipts proving the delivery of the required gold boxes to the Pasha. The sultan, satisfied, then tells them to embark again as soon as possible to reach Trebizond, where they will find an armed escort waiting for them. There will also be an armored carriage to transport the gold and four passengers. In Trebizond they will also take with them the American consul for that city, who has been appointed by his government as plenipotentiary of the

Ganja Khanate because the US wants to keep an eye on Russian movements in the region. They will proceed overland toward the Armenian border, making a stop at Erzurum in Eastern Anatolia. The fortress city is hotly contested by the Russians, who have been masters of Armenia since 1828. There they will decide what to do: whether to pass into Russian territory north of Yervam and Lake Sevan and then on to Ganja or to pass south from Persia and from there enter Azerbaijani territory directly. The road north is smooth and comfortable, and the Russian customs officers, without too many questions, let through anyone who pays them a hefty tip. However, there is an agreement between Russia and the Ottoman Empire that diplomatic missions to and from the Muslim Khanates are untouchable, and in fact it is in this guise that they will travel. The Grand Vizir has already prepared diplomatic letters in Russian, Armenian, and Turkish-Azeri, accrediting him and his escort as envoys of the Sultan. This road, however, is infested with bandits, i.e., Russian soldiers or Armenian deserters who have gone into hiding and live by robbery. On the other hand, the road to the south is much longer than the one to the north and is only traced in parts. What is more, it is a track that could prove difficult to take by carriage. But this path is without pitfalls because, passing through Iran, they will even be escorted by the Persians as they are also on a religious mission. The Grand Vizir shows them a fatwa from the Imam of Hagia Sophia written in Turkish and Farsi ordering all Muslims to defend and protect their convoy as they go on an important religious mission for the glory of Allah. Russell takes the documents with him. The Sultan dismisses the group, telling the Pasha that he is very grateful to him and, on his return, could ask him for any favor. The pasha and his retinue return to the Galata Tower. In the

meantime, from the boat in which they had arrived from Nysiros, horses had been unloaded and are now grazing inside the tower compound. Frog goes to greet them and rides some of them. As he interacts with the horses, the Grand Druid watches him from the tower. Frog's riding is graceful and elegant, while that of the Druids on horseback is cumbersome. The animal feels the Druids' siliceous side and, not recognizing it as human, refuses to obey commands. Therefore, to keep the horses in line, the druids must make enormous efforts at the expense of speed, precision, and stability. Kellan imagines what could happen if he had the power to assilicate the horses as well. Basically, druids and horses would become one, and they would be all the more deadly in clashes with Vikindians. And that's not all. If he could also assilicate the orcas, his druids, after being trained by Frog, would form a deadly aquatic weapon, and thus he and his men would be able to attack the Vikindians by land and sea. But these, for now, are only dreams. Not even the reproduction of the ivory flute will help him. And it will soon be in his hands because he has decided that he will have it made in Ganja since the best craftsmen in the region are gathered there. In fact, with or without the flute, animals are neither tattooable nor assilicable. He unfortunately knows this well because he has tried and failed it so many times.

Set 4

The next day, the Grand Druid and his entire entourage re-embark and sail off for Trebizond, where they arrive early the next morning. Kellan gives instructions to his men and personally orders Frog to land the horses in an orderly manner.

He does not want to make a bad impression just as the beylerbey, or governor of Trebizond, is waiting for him on the quay, and with him the American in an elegant travelling suit. Once ashore, the beylerbey presents him with his compliments and introduces him to the American as the powerful Pasha Vadim Buhran. The American introduces himself as Mr. Edward Herbert Brooke. Frog, as he slowly leads the horses out, is astonished to see that man because he was with them on the transatlantic crossing and was at the Golden Bison dinner. The man, however, even when Frog is in front of him, does not seem to recognize him. When the last chest of gold has also been unloaded, the beylerbey orders the armored carriage to approach the quay. The governor shows it to his guests in satisfaction, and the Pasha, with a wave of his hand, gives instructions to his men to stow the shipment. The walrus tooth is stored alongside the gold. When the operation is complete, the druids mount their horses, including Frog, while Kellan, Brooke, Russel, and Wayne get into the carriage. They are joined by 20 janissaries with a horse-drawn cannon and its ammunition cart. The soup wagon follows. The convoy departs. In two days, they arrive in Erzurum, where the commander of the local garrison reports on the situation. The Armenian road to Ganja seems to have been pacified by the Russians. He receives comforting news in this regard from those who have recently traveled it. Kellan consults with Brooke, and they decide to pass through Armenia, which is the shortest and easiest route to take with such heavy carriages. The commander then informs them that the Sultan had personally ordered him in a missive that if the convoy took the Armenian route, he himself should accompany them to the border with an additional escort of soldiers and ensure that the diplomatic mission would be allowed to pass without

incident. The border is a few dozen kilometers from the fortress city. The Russian customs officers, faced with the convoy and the armed escort, send for their commander. Brooke speaks Russian and Armenian and explains to the duty officer about the diplomatic mission to the Khanate of Ganja. The man examines the letters of accreditation carefully and, undecided as to what to do, wishes to telegraph his superiors. But the Pasha reaches him and hands him a small bag, which the soldier opens. Inside are gold nuggets and precious stones, more than enough to repay his gambling debts and accounts with the mistress of the gambling den/brothel where he squanders his wages. His men have also received a handsome tip in nuggets and are pleased to let the caravan pass. The carriage is not searched, and the captain gives the go-ahead. He prepares and signs a pass, sealing it with lacquer wax.

Set 5

From the Russian-Armenian border to the Azerbaijani border and then on to Ganja, the convoy takes 10 days. The roadway has been widened by the Russians and is well maintained. In the various villages they pass, they buy provisions. Brooke is surprised at how little they take compared to the mouths there would be to feed: practically little more than half of what is needed. But Kellan knows why he does it: he, Russell, and Wayne do not eat at all; the other fifteen druids, already half-siliceous, eat less than half of an average human. The consul, Frog, and the 24 Janissaries are the only ones still in need of food. The Russian checkpoints have been alerted to the diplomats' itinerary and let them pass without a hitch. But all those nuggets handed out by Kellan at the border have tickled the greed of

more than one soldier. Kars, three days away, is the last major population center before Ganja. Beyond are scattered small villages, but otherwise, one is left alone with the mountains and their attendant dangers. During the carriage ride Brooke attempts to talk to the pasha and his two attendants. The two are taciturn Londoners who only answer out of courtesy. They spend the rest of the time reading books on law or banking. With the pasha one can talk about anything: he is highly educated and speaks numerous languages. Brooke, who knows very well who Frog is, tries to ask how it is that the boy is with him. The pasha replies that he bought him at the Antalia slave market. A group of Ottoman fishermen had caught him, finding him trapped in a net together with some dolphins. The boy spoke English and said he was a native of North America, which had driven up the price. But other details he does not reveal. Every evening at dusk, they set up an encampment. Tents are put up, a fire lit, and dinner prepared. Frog takes care of the horses' health and feeding. The consul is served dinner in his tent. The pasha and his retinue shut themselves in their tents shortly after the camp is set up, only to reappear in the morning. Brooke, however, cannot help but notice that food is never brought to them, that the lamps in those tents never go out during the night, and that it is the Janissaries who sleep at night while only the pasha's men keep watch. However, a strong drowsiness overtakes Brooke immediately after dinner, prompting him to head straight to bed until they wake him up. The fact that he wakes up fresh as a daisy convinces him that it is the tiredness of the journey that has made him fall asleep. In reality, Brooke, on the Grand Druid's orders, is served dinner laced with his hypnotic powder so that when he wakes up, Brooke remembers nothing and hears and sees nothing during the night. The powder, if ingested, causes

severe attacks of somnolence. Kellan is not stupid and, from the very first day, had noticed that the grass around the consul's tent was much greener in the morning than around the other tents. So Kellan knows that Brooke is a Vikindian. That is why when Brooke, on several occasions, tries to approach Frog, a pasha man immediately arrives to take the boy away.

Set 6

Stealthy spies had been following the diplomatic convoy from afar, taking turns as it advanced, from the moment it entered Russian territory. They were Russian irregulars, alerted by the border command after a tip-off from the head of the garrison at Erzurum, to monitor the convoy and prepare for the moment of the assault. Halfway between Kars and Ganja, far from any major urban center, it was decided that a company of Russian and Armenian guerrillas would rob and kill them. The bandits would be blamed for the incident, while the gold and valuables would be divided among the various local warlords, both uniformed and not. In the middle of the night on the fifth day of the journey, Frog is awoken by the horses sounding nervous. Frog looks out from his tent but sees only the fire in the center of the camp and the light coming from the tents of the Grand Druid and the others. The Druids are on sentry duty, and all seems well. Suddenly a storm of gunfire hits the tents. Frog goes outside, runs to the horses, climbs onto one of them, and blows a blade of grass. The animals return in a tranquil state. Frog leads the horse in the direction of a rock outcrop where they can take cover. The other horses follow him without neighing. The druids in the pitch black cannot see where the shots are coming from,

but when the Grand Druid emerges from the tent, a lightning storm erupts, lighting up the night in daylight. The attackers number over a hundred. O'Hara takes command of the defense. The Druids fly ouroboroi at the attackers, who are sliced like butter while the Grand Druid drops rain and lightning bolts on those with rifles so as to electroshock their weapons and render them useless. Many die of electrocution from the strong electric discharge. Within minutes the attackers are decimated and flee. At that point, the Grand Druid pulls out his flute and plays the double melody in reverse. Within a few tens of seconds, the mountain shakes and causes a landslide of huge boulders to collapse on the fugitives, burying every last remaining assailant. When calm returns, the damage and casualties are counted. No Druids were killed, but many Janissaries were mown down in their sleep while sleeping in their tents. Only five remain alive who, having come out of their tent to fight, are stunned by what they have seen. The Grand Druid marks them with the tattoo to prevent them from speaking. Their uniform has long sleeves anyway, and the tattoo will not be visible. In the morning, Brooke wakes up and sees his tent pierced by bullets. He comes out worried and sees the men intent on burying the Janissaries while, all around him, there is chaos and signs of a battle, a storm, and an earthquake. Brooke goes to the pasha to ask what happened while he was sleeping. The Pasha downplays it by saying that a band of ragged marauders had tried to storm the camp, but the Janissaries valiantly defended it and put the brigands to flight. A shot from the cannon at the attackers had then caused a landslide uphill. Then it started raining. In the end, not much had happened. It was just a skirmish— so much so that the sounds of the clash had not even woken him up. Brooke pretends to be satisfied with the answer, but inside he wonders

how it was that, if it had only been a skirmish, there had been so many deaths. And how is it that he heard nothing despite the cannon blast and the ensuing landslide? Brooke blames the soup wagon's delicious food for his after-dinner somnolence. The pasha is the richest Ottoman after the Sultan, so he certainly has the best cooks in the empire at his service. Effectively, the meals they served him so far were excellent. To make matters worse, dinners are washed down with exquisite Armenian wine bought in the Yerevan area. No wonder he sleeps like a stone every night. The last five days of the journey pass without any more unpleasant encounters, and finally the convoy reaches the border of the khanate, where an armed escort sent by the khan accompanies them to Ganja.

Set 7

When they enter the city, they are amazed when they pass by the construction site of the shrine: the dome to be gilded is truly enormous, and the complex is imposing. The convoy, greeted by wings of jubilant crowds, arrives at the palace where the Khan awaits them on the threshold of the building alongside the Vizier, his prime minister, his entire harem of wives behind him, the body of honor lined up on parade. The Khan greets the pasha with all due reverence and welcomes the ambassador. O'Hara and Marlowe handle the gold, unloading it and transporting it to the palace's bunker wing, which functions as the treasure chamber. From there it will be distributed to the goldsmiths to begin forging it and then applied to the dome. Frog, whom the Grand Druid wants to be his page according to Ottoman fashion, is sent with the servants to be washed and dressed

while the Druids and Janissaries are quartered in a barracks on the outskirts of the city. The khan takes the pasha and the consul on an official tour of his palace. The guests ask how long it will take the goldsmiths to mold the gold and gild the dome. The khan, delighted, replies that the dome will be ready in two days. In fact, the khan has gathered a large number of goldsmiths from as far south as Persia. They will work hard without ever stopping, so the complex will be finished at the first call of the muezzin. Kellan inquires whether it is true that he has hired only the best craftsmen, and the Khan replies in the affirmative. The Pasha asks if it would be possible to meet them. The khan sees no problem with it and tells him to go whenever he wants. He will find the craftsmen working in temporary workshops around the mausoleum. The conversation returns to the inauguration, and the Khan goes on to outline the day's program. After prayer in their respective mosques, his subjects will gather in front of the complex, which will be officially inaugurated by the Khan, the pasha representing the sultan, and the consul as the representative of the Christian nations. Afterwards, a grand banquet will be served in the palace, at which point his guests will be free to depart. Until then, the Khan invites them to behave as if they were at home and announces that there will always be servants around them from whom they can ask for anything they need. The khan then summons some men and women and orders them to accompany his guests to their respective flats. Brooke and the Pasha separate.

Set 8

Kellan, having arrived at his quarters, holds a briefing with his men. He orders that there is always at least one druid following and tailing Brooke. Frog, as soon as he is settled, to be brought to him. He must not stray, go out, and especially talk to Brooke. Also, they should immediately have a carriage prepared to go and see the mausoleum under construction. After all, the Sultan is the one who financed part of it, and he, as Pasha and imperial representative, has a duty to go and check it out. On the carriage, Kellan concludes, he wants the walrus tooth also to be loaded. Frog, meanwhile, has been taken to a tub of hot water in what appears to be a kind of spa bath for servants. Two bare-breasted and turbaned big men undress the boy, immerse him in the water, and with strong brushes remove from him the dust and sweat of many days' riding. His clothes are thrown into the mouth of a furnace and burnt. With only a white rag tied around his waist, he is passed to some old women who take him to a huge servants' wardrobe. They square him up, take his measurements by eye, and fit him with an Ottoman page outfit with a fez and breeches. A servant comes to ask if Frog is ready because his master wants him in his service. In following the servant towards the Grand Druid's flats, Frog crosses paths with a beautiful and athletic girl dressed as a princess with four girls in tow, also beautiful and athletic. All of them are armed with eye-catching daggers. Among them Frog notices a young girl of his own age with almond-shaped eyes and dark skin. She too notices Frog but passes by indifferently, as both the servant and he bow as the princess passes by. Frog would like to know who the woman is, but he does not speak Turkish

and cannot communicate with the servant. A servant is sent from Kellan's flats to the stables to have a carriage prepared. After a few tens of minutes, the servant returns, saying that the horses are ready, and accompanies them to an inner courtyard where there is a carriage with a coachman who will also act as their guide and accompany them wherever they wish. The small group consisting of Kellan, Marlowe, O'Hara, Russell, and Wayne gets into the coach and sets off outside the palace. Frog is ordered to wait for their return locked in his small room, which can only be accessed from the Grand Druid's bedroom. For safety, Kellan leaves two druids guarding the boy's door. When they arrive at the mausoleum, they find several armed guards at the gate and many soldiers inside the perimeter. The pasha makes himself known and asks permission to enter to supervise the work. The garrison commander summons the head of the construction site, who says he is pleased to welcome them and show them the progress of the work. The Grand Druid is taken inside the building that needs just some last touches, and then he is brought up from outside to the edge of the dome. A tour of the workshops follows. After seeing the goldsmiths, stone masons, and pottery glaziers at work, Kellan asks the site manager to take him to the best cabinetmaker they have. The site manager informs Kellan that the most skilled cabinetmaker is an Iranian luthier, currently working on a series of intricate wooden inlays. The Grand Druid is shown to his workshop and then takes leave of the foreman. He wants to talk to the guy himself. Kellan finds the man finishing some wooden boards inlaid with verses from the Koran. It is a work of unique complexity, and Kellan is impressed. The Grand Druid explains to the man that he needs some urgent work done. On his return to Constantinople, he wants to give the Sultan a precious flute

made of a special material. The ivory comes from the tooth of a marine animal that thrives in the North Pole's ice. Kellan shows the man the walrus tooth, and the man is astounded because he had never seen anything like it before. Kellan adds that in the entire empire he has not been able to find a luthier up to the task, but, having come to Ganja, the Khan himself had suggested that he look among the craftsmen engaged in the decoration of the mausoleum because they were the best in the entire Islamic world. The man feels flattered. The Grand Druid pulls out the regenerated iron flute and instructs him to create an exact replica using the ivory he had brought. With one difference. The mouthpiece must have a place to set a metal amulet similar to the one mounted on the underside of the iron flute. To make him understand what the finished work should look like, Kellan shows him the broken mouthpiece of Allan's flute. He recommends that, when the work is finished, the four pieces should fit together. The cabinetmaker says there is no problem. Kellan then takes out a sack of gold and puts it next to him. It would all be his, but on the condition that a pasha man would always stay with him to see that, for no reason whatsoever in the world, the two flutes are played. The penalty is immediate death. The man, somewhat astonished by the request but having never received such a large fee, replies that he will get to work immediately. O'Hara summons one of the two druids who were escorting them by sitting in the box with the coachman. The druid is instructed by Marlowe and immediately puts himself on guard. Marlowe orders him to kill the craftsman instantly if he hears a single note from one of the two flutes. Following this, the pasha's group departs in the carriage, heading back to the palace. Meanwhile, Brooke found a way to slip out of

the palace inconspicuously. He has had his valet bring him Ottoman clothes and, confused with the servants, has left the palace unseen. On the city streets he looks around for telegraph cables or wires but finds none. It is imperative that he informs the Vikindian chiefs of the fate of Frog, who has ended up a slave to a rich Ottoman pasha from whom it will be difficult to take him away. Brooke has no idea that the Pasha is actually Kellan. Brooke, sporting a fluent Turkish that intrigues the Azerbaijanis, asks if there is any way to send mail to Constantinople, and they explain that yes, there is a courier, but that he has just left and will not be back for twenty days. The American, strong in his proficiency in the Turkish language, tells them that he is a Turkish pilgrim who has come for the inauguration of the shrine and asks around for opinions on the work that will be inaugurated soon. In a café, smoking a pipe, he meets a Sufi master who tells him that the finished work will be extraordinary. The khan wanted a dome that respected strict parameters of sacred geometry, which is why it came out larger than expected. The gilding of the dome will increase its energetic power, and thus the main hall of the shrine will be transformed into a huge hyperbaric chamber to heal the soul. Furthermore, the building with the dome will be a magnifier of psychic powers. There are Indian gurus who have been on the road for weeks to be in town in two days. Yogis, fakirs, and clairvoyants hope to amplify their magical abilities by using the geomagnetic power of the dome. Brooke reveals to the man that he is empowered to learn a new language very quickly and to speak it with any accent. The Sufi then tells him that someone like him under that dome could amplify his ability to the point of learning a new language in a matter of days. Having said this, the Sufi takes his leave, saying that he must get ready or he will be late for the

5 p.m. prayer. With him, other men leave to go to the mosque. Before anyone notices his absence, Brooke makes the decision to return to the palace. He did not realize, however, that among the men who have risen and are leaving are two of the Janissaries from the Druid's escort who were sitting nearby. They have no uniform but are dressed as devotees. The two overhear the conversation and immediately go to report it to Marlowe, who informs the Grand Druid.

Set 9

In the evening, both Brooke and the Pasha are invited to dinner by their host. Brooke eats with gusto while the Pasha and his entourage barely seem to nibble at a bit of bread. They apologize, saying they are still a little dazed from the journey. The Khan, seeing Brooke's satisfaction, points out that the dinner was cooked under the direction of his daughter. He has summoned her to present her to his guests. Her name is Dunya, and she is very gorgeous. The Khan, at that juncture, announces that his daughter has been chosen to be the Sultan's next wife and that she will come with them on their return journey. They will accompany her to Constantinople. Brooke compliments the girl on her beauty and femininity and, just as she has cooked this exquisite dinner, says he is convinced she will be an excellent palace lady. The khan smiles, expecting something. The girl looks embarrassed, greets the guests shyly, and makes to leave. Brooke goes back to eating and drinking, but, with the girl already at the door, he hears a hissing sound and a moment later sees a knife piercing the metal plate where he is eating and sticking firmly on the table. Immediately a flurry of knives

flies past him, grazing him and tearing his clothes. The Khan bursts into laughter, explaining to Brooke that his daughter is a skilled warrior. She can shoot with the bow, fence, use cutting weapons, and ride beautifully. The girl, after a while, returns to the room. She has a pair of polo rackets with her. She throws them on the table in front of Brooke and challenges him to a match the next day. She and four other riders, all women, her handmaidens, will compete against the five best horsemen of the 'outlanders.' The pasha seems amused and gives his assent, so Brooke accepts the challenge. Around midnight, there is a knock at the door of the Grand Druid's room. The craftsman has finished his work, and the druid who was supervising him during the work has brought back, in a box, the broken flute, the iron flute, and the brand new ivory flute. Kellan looks at the artifact: it is perfect. The Grand Druid asks to close all the doors and to cover the windows with the carpets on the floor. When everything is ready, the Grand Druid picks up the mouthpiece of Allan's flute and throws it to the ground, breaking it into a thousand pieces. He retrieves the corroded ouroboros and places it closed between his palms. A dazzling, bright light comes out of Kellan's clasped hands, which he immediately opens again, showing the regenerated ouroboros. Kelln encases the ouroboros in the ivory flute, then disassembles the two flutes and reassembles them so that one flute has both ouroboroi and the other flute without. The two ouroboroi, once reunited into one instrument, make flashes and sparks for a while. Then they quiet down. At that point, before the final test, Kellan sends for Frog. Frog, locked in his room since the afternoon, is woken up and thrown out of bed and brought before the Grand Druid. After a clap of Kellan's hands, two of the janissaries in civilian clothes enter the room carrying an old beggar taken from the street. The

man is not even from Ganja because he speaks Persian. He is one of those derelict pilgrims who have come from northern Iran to the mausoleum's inauguration ceremony in the hope of collecting a lot of alms, given the large crowd announced for the event. Kellan gives the man a gold coin, and the man looks radiant. He then takes the flute with the two ouroboroi and asks the beggar to play it. The man does not think twice, puts his mouth on the mouthpiece, and blows. The two ouroboroi emit electric discharges and swarms of sparks, and immediately afterwards the beggar becomes a black stone statue and then explodes in a flash of magnesium that scatters dust all around. Frog is stunned, and Kellan warns those present that this is the fate that will befall anyone who violates his strict order not to approach the two instruments. Kellan retrieves them, reassembles them properly, and places them in a chest to which he alone has the key. Then he sends for the servant- butler assigned to him by the khan. The man sees the carpets on the windows and the floor of the room covered in gray dust. He asks what has happened. He is told that Frog, while trying to clean the stove, has dropped ash and scattered it everywhere. They placed the carpets on the windows to prevent further soiling. They are precious, aren't they? The pasha orders that servants be sent to put everything back in place and clean up the dirt while he retires to his rooms. With a nod of his head, he makes it clear to Frog that he must follow him. When the door to the pasha's bedroom closes, two druids stand guard while Marlowe and O'Hara supervise the cleaning. Frog informs Kellan that he has spent the entire day locked in his room and, unsure of what to do, has slept for numerous hours. Now he is not sleepy. The Grand Druid laughs and says not to worry; he will take care of his sleep. In resignation, Frog lies down on his bed while the door

to the small room is locked. Kellan takes some of his hypnotic powder and, from under the door, blows it into Frog's room. The boy falls asleep instantly.

Set 10

After settling the matter of Frog, the Grand Druid stretches out on a couch to reflect. The dome of the mausoleum, from what he saw, might indeed be an energy booster. The old man's story might not just be a legend spread around by the khan to draw attention to his kingdom. Kellan, in his readings after his escape, had read ancient treatises on Islamic sacred architecture in which they spoke of buildings of worship constructed according to specific measures that allowed those places to become amplifiers of material and spiritual energies. After all, those of the Arab mystical scholars were lucubrations not very different from those of the Freemasons in London with whom he, through the Ottoman Co., often dealt. Even the underground Druidic temples that he himself built respond to precise geometric criteria to amplify energies. In his travels around the Ottoman Empire, Kellan had often visited the most famous mosques in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. They were places with a strong spiritual charge, but none of them had the right size to transform into the kind of energy accumulator he needed. But this time the dome of Ganja—the largest in Islam—seems to be the squaring of the circle. No wonder Islamic mystical geometry treaties have so far remained a dead letter. No Islamic ruler, however wealthy he was, could provide all the gold it would take to build a dome large enough to satisfy the mystical circumvolutions of some Sufi sheikh. But to him, Kellan, gold

costs nothing, and it was fortunate that the khan took it upon himself to complete this pharaonic project. Only the Grand Druid's ability to produce gold without limitation and the khan's spiritual megalomania, coming together, allowed Islam's most powerfully spiritual shrine and, at the same time, the world's most extraordinary energy machine to be realized. With the flute finally in his possession and the dome now completed, Kellan is now able to assilicate not only humans but also animals. Currently, this is merely a highly plausible hypothesis, not a certainty. If, however, Kellan is right, his organization could be equipped with fighting animals such as horses, camels, and elephants that are unassailable by normal firearms and easily ridden by druids, thus making his men deadly and unbeatable warriors. If the operation succeeds, then he will also build a mosque in Nysiros. A mosque with an identical dome near the sea and with a canal running into the building. And so the killer whales will also be transformed into invincible instruments of death. Frog could act as an instructor as far as riding sea animals is concerned. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct a test immediately. The Grand Druid comes out of his room and finds the team of servants who have come to clean up leaving. Kellan talks to the butler of his quarters and orders him to have a carriage prepared because he is not sleepy and feels like taking a night walk through the city. They get into their carriage and ask their coachman, the same as in the afternoon, to take them to see the almost completed building site of the mausoleum. After midnight, the city's streets are desolate. The construction site bustles with carts and people, with laborers diligently working to complete the mausoleum by the scheduled date. At the entrance to the compound are armed guards who scrupulously check every person entering and leaving. The

pasha asks if he can enter to see the construction site at night, but one of the guards replies that they have strict orders not to let anyone in except the workforce. Now the men must be focused on what they are doing, and no visits or interruptions from anyone are allowed. It is a personal order from the Khan, and they cannot make exceptions. This rule applies even to a pasha of the Empire. Kellan at least asks to have the carriage enter the first courtyard in front of the building, and this, after long consultations, is granted. The coachman brings the vehicle inside and stops. Kellan and his fellas get out. The Grand Druid gestures to Marlowe and O'Hara, who raise a thick fog all at once. All the workers stop and start calling each other so as not to get lost in the fog. They are ordered by the site manager to stand still and not move to prevent them from hurting themselves. On his way in, Kellan noticed the mausoleum's doors closed, indicating that no one was working inside. These are exactly the conditions he wanted to realize his plan to test the building. Kellan gives orders to his men to knock out the coachman. Marlowe, from behind, hits him with a club on the head and knocks him unconscious. Kellan can then dematerialize to reappear inside the building just under the dome. The flash in which he disappears is seen by few, so thick is the fog. The Grand Druid, alone inside, stands under the dome. It is dark, but he can see. Despite the scaffolding surrounding the walls, the interior appears finished. But the dome remains incomplete and may not yet function properly. He is only here to see how the structure reacts to the flute melodies, but it wouldn't be bad if he had an animal at his disposal. As he is about to start playing, he hears a rustling at his feet and a meow. It is a cat that has entered through the outer scaffolding from one of the tall openings in the building. Inside the hall, the druid raises a

smokescreen of intense black clouds, obstructing the windows and preventing any outside glow. Then he takes the cat with both hands and places it in the center of the building. At this point he begins to play. The walls of the building are so thick that nothing can be heard outside. As the notes of the melody play, Kellan can feel the telluric energies bubbling beneath him as sparks fly from the dome and small flashes of lightning are created. Kellan continues to play, and the shower of sparks intensifies as the lightning flashes become more dazzling. Then, suddenly, a beam of energy, though not too powerful, pours into the center of the room, striking the animal, which disappears in a dazzling bubble of plasma. Kellan finishes playing, and the energy storm subsides. The cat's stiffened silhouette glows in the darkness as if it were glowing metal; then, in a final glow, it cools down. The cat starts moving again and walks over to Kellan, rubbing his legs and purring. Upon picking it up, the Grand Druid discovers, to his astonishment, that the cat has been fully assilicated. So beaming, he concludes that the dome works, albeit on a small scale. Until its completion, the dome can only affect small living beings. Kellan instructs the cat to join him outside, and the cat, with giant leaps and an unprecedented speed, darts over the scaffolding and out through the windows at the top. With a gesture, Kellan turns the black clouds into a light white smoke that a gentle breeze pushes out of the building. After making sure he has left no trace of his passage, the Grand Druid dematerializes to reappear outside. Marlowe and O'Hara throw a bucket of water at the awakening coachman. When he inquires about his condition, they inform him that a flying piece of rubble struck his head. The man gets up as the fog disappears as quickly as it had come. The guards and workers, still confused by the sudden and unexpected atmospheric event,

did not notice anything. In fact, the guards, the fog having disappeared, immediately rush to the pasha to make sure he is all right and that he has not hurt himself because of the almost zero visibility. Kellan reassures them, regretting that the fog did not allow him to see the workers at work in the middle of the night. Now, however, it is late, and he must return to the palace. The guards apologize profusely for the mishap, although they are not responsible for it, while the Grand Druid and his henchmen get back into the carriage to be driven around the sleeping city before returning home. There is now a new passenger in the carriage: the silicious cat. They return to the palace at dawn just before the muezzin's first call to prayer. Frog, still asleep in his room, wakes up when he hears them coming. Someone opens the door of the small room, and Frog is free to leave. But as soon as he tries to get out, the boy is confronted by a metal-colored cat that stands on the doorstep with an aggressive attitude and its fur sticking up. Frog is frightened, but the Grand Druid's hand picks up the cat and caresses him, calming him down. Kellan has a new task for Frog. He has decided that the boy will also be part of the polo team along with Brooke, O'Hara, Marlowe, and one of the Janissaries. So he has immediately to go with O'Hara to choose a horse.

Set 11

The next morning, the butler asks permission to speak with the Grand Druid and reports that the Khan is waiting for the pasha in the royal pavilion of the stables. Accompanied by the servant to the meeting place, Kellan finds Brooke talking to the Khan. The Khan takes them to see a special horse. The

horse in question is a female. She is a very rare specimen of a cross between a Mongolian and an Arabian horse and therefore has characteristics of outstanding speed and endurance. The specimen is a natural cross and was captured in the mountains of Armenia. Once trained, such a horse can be worth its weight in gold. Well, the khan, for the afternoon game, will put the horse up for grabs for the winners. The Grand Druid has a flash: that might just be the right horse to be assilicated first. The khan dismisses them, and Brooke and the Grand Druid meet after a few hours to organize the team and have a few rehearsals in the palace hall. They gather at midday prayer. They rehearse with horses, with clubs, and attempt some game action but with little success. Marlowe and O'Hara struggle to ride their horses properly while Frog has never played and is a bit clumsy with the club. Brooke gets by having played polo when he was at college in England, while the Janissary comes from the mountains and is used to the game. The only difference for him is that, at home in Anatolia, the ball is replaced by a dead sheep, and there are no clubs. While they are at practice, they see Dunya and the four girls watching them amused from a loggia of the palace. At 3 p.m., the sports field at the royal palace in Ganja is packed to the sides of the pitch. The news of the challenge has quickly spread, and a significant number of people have gathered at the edge of the pitch. The courtiers are instead seated on a grandstand reserved for the distinguished guests only. On the other hand, the Khan and the Grand Druid observe the game from a curtain-covered raised stage, lying on mats and cushions, smoking a waterpipe. While the audience is betting hard, waiting for the match to begin, the teams arrive on the pitch and face each other. Dunya, in perfect English, although Brooke notices that the girl's English has a 17th-century flavor,

gives them a defiant little speech. Brooke, as captain of the team, laughs in disbelief, even though, deep down, he knows there is little to swagger about. Frog does not listen to a single word because he is awkwardly watching the almond-eyed girl he had bumped into in the corridors of the palace after his arrival. The teams line up, and the referee starts the game. In the very first seconds, one of the women makes a backward pass to Dunya, who is at ¾ of her halfcourt. Before the ball can even come to rest, she unleashes a powerful strike, sending it flying like a bullet across the field. The ball, without encountering any resistance, sails into the net. 1-0 for Ganja. The game restarts, and the actions follow one another until, after a spat in the midfield, the little Mongolian girl receives the ball and runs wildly towards the opponent's goal. Brooke and the others run after her, but only Frog is there to defend. The boy goes towards her and, with a swerve, takes the horse sideways so that she slows down. But she does not. She continues her frantic dash, and when she is on the verge of a collision with Frog, she raises the ball in the air and makes the horse take a spectacular leap. The little girl and her horse pass over Frog, who, in order not to be run over, ducks. The little girl, having touched the ground again, runs undisturbed toward the goal. 2-0 for Ganja and the crowd falls into a frenzy. The game restarts, and time passes. At one point, Dunya receives the ball near the opponent's goal, but Brooke is in a favorable position to stop her. When their sticks collide, Dunya is so strong that in shooting she breaks the stick at Brooke, who is left with a stump in his hand as the ball crosses the goal line. 3-0 to Ganja and break. The Grand Druid reaches his team and asks what is going on. Brooke replies that the girls are too strong. A simple glance from the Druid at O'Hara and Marlowe triggers in them the realization that they

could overturn the result using a few tricks. The second half of the match begins, and it immediately goes badly for the guests. After a few plays, one of the girls brings the ball forward and is about to pass it to Dunya, who is on her way to goal, when the ground sags slightly under her horse, causing her to lose the ball that is thrown forward. Shortly afterwards, the guests are close to the opponent's goal, but the girls are well lined up in defense. O'Hara makes a powerful but lopsided shot, but a series of raised clods, which no one had noticed before, seems to favor the trajectory of the ball, which ultimately bounces off a previously unseen mound of earth and into the goal. 3:1. The game resumes, but the girls seem to have difficulty with the horses. The ground seems to sway as they pass, making it difficult for them to ride. Brooke takes advantage of this, and when the ball is his turn, he flies towards the goal. Waiting for him is Dunya, who comes running straight at him as if she wants to collide with him. But just as she is about to cross Brooke's stick, a gust of wind blows a handful of sand into her face, and so Brooke deftly dodges her and goes in on goal. 3-2. Frog, at one point in the match, receives a pass in midfield, and he starts running towards the goal area. The little Mongolian girl approaches him at enormous speed on his left flank. When the girl is close, Frog takes a strong shot at the ball, which goes forward. He then jumps off his horse, which keeps going forward. Frog lands with his feet on her horse's rump as the girl looks at him in amazement. The small lady slows down her speed but Frog, after giving her a pat, a moment later jumps back to his horse, landing on the saddle and delivering the final blow to the ball that goes in the goal. 3-3. The girls just can't manage to score, and when Dunya, after much effort, manages to get to the point of shooting at an empty goal, the ball, hit by the stick,

pulverizes as if by magic. Dunya complains to the referee, but he replies that breaking the ball is an uncommon but recurring event during a polo match, and then the referee asks for another ball and signals that time is running out. The ball goes to the guests, who take it into the opponent's area. A scrum is created in an attempt to control the ball by several players, and when the scrum gets intense, suddenly dust rises up, blinding the players in the area as if a light daredevil had risen up around the knights. The centrifugal force of the vortex causes the ball to splash away from the scrum, where it is picked up by Brooke and sent into the goal. The match ends with a score of 4-3. The players are called to the Khan stand, but Dunya, arriving in front of her father, breaks the stick and leaves. She justifies her gesture by complaining that something strange happened in the second half that prevented them from winning. But the audience present did not notice much, and neither did the Khan. Even Brooke, caught up in the game, did not notice anything suspicious. He believes he won by skill. The khan asks his grooms to bring in the horse. As it enters the arena, the audience emits cheers of amazement. It is beautiful, but it is still in a semi-wild state and is held by the bridle by two enormous muscular men. The khan ideally hands it over to the pasha, who promises Brooke to reward him for the victory. The khan invites the players and the pasha, that very evening, to his yacht for a banquet on the river Ganja.

Set 12

Brooke and Frog go to the banquet. With them are O'Hara and Marlowe, plus the janissary. The ship, fully lit and festively

decorated, is at anchor on the royal quay on the river. Armed guards and servants look after security and guests. When the group of winners arrives at the embarkation gangway, they are greeted with great reverence. The Khan, who has come to welcome them, asks where the pasha is and is told that he is not there because he prefers to spend the night in prayer to thank Allah both for the victory of his men and for the great inauguration the next day. The Khan, satisfied with the answer because he too is a fervent believer, takes them below deck, where there are magnificent rooms full of people, food, and music. Brooke, in the course of the evening, has the opportunity to speak with Dunya. He compliments her on the game but is a bit of a show-off about winning. Dunya points out to him that she and her team would have crushed them had it not been for a whole series of strange incidents that slowed them down and put them at a disadvantage against their opponents. Brooke, believing that the girl does not know how to lose, asks somewhat sarcastically which incidents she is referring to. But here O'Hara, who was eavesdropping on the conversation and under orders not to let Brooke understand too much, interjects herself into the conversation and takes it elsewhere, then manages to get the Khan's daughter to leave. Brooke remains puzzled. Marlowe, on the other hand, keeps an eye on Frog, who, however, does not seem to give any trouble. The little Mongolian girl approaches Frog. She says something to him in Turkish, and he tries to answer her in Cherokee, but nothing. They do not understand each other. The little girl then tells him, in English, that her name is Khulan, as Genghis Khan's wife. She comes from Kazakhstan and is the daughter of a chieftain. Her grandfather was a Khan who had been dethroned by the Russians. To turn the situation around, her father organized an anti-Russian uprising

that ended badly. Her parents were killed, and the same fate would befall her, who was only five years old at the time. Her father, however, foresaw the disaster and entrusted her to a servant and his wife to be taken to Ganja, whose khan was a family friend. Princess Dunya took her in as a little sister, and she has lived in the palace ever since. She is now 15 years old. Frog asks her how it is that she knows English. Khulan replies that it was Dunya who made her learn it. In fact, the daughter of the khan loves Shakespeare very much. Frog sighs. A company of English street actors had passed through Ganja and had staged some of the writer's plays in the market square. People did not understand a word but stood watching spellbound until the end. Word reached Dunya, who wanted to invite the wandering actors to the palace to perform before the court. Dunya was so impressed by the play with the man talking to the skull that she wanted them to do it again. As it turned out, the actors stayed at the palace for almost a year, performing almost their entire Shakespearean repertoire. Dunya, in that year, wanted to learn the language of Shakespeare. The actors assisted her, and she also aimed to include her handmaids and ladies-in-waiting in her English lessons. That is why she also knows English. Khulan asks him if he wants her to recite some Shakespeare passages to him. Frog says that he too knows some passages from one of the dramatist's plays that he learned from Bless' script. The two set about reciting Hamlet. Marlowe, with eyes and ears, follows Frog attentively, but he only seems to be in gallant conversation with the young girl. The banquet goes on late into the night. Marlowe and O'Hara, it seems to Brooke, neither drink nor eat much. On the other hand, they keep everyone away from the boy. Even that evening, Brooke has no way of talking to him.

Set 13

While the elite of Ganja are at that banquet, the Grand Druid waits for the city to fall asleep so he can spring into action. Around one o'clock in the morning, Kellan sends for the butler of his quarters and tells him that he feels like taking a carriage ride through the city. He wants to thank the Almighty for the gift of the horse and therefore needs to go outdoors and be able to talk with heaven while looking at the sky. In the meantime, the druids arrive, ready to escort him out. Kellan, with the cat in his arms, and his men go to the stables where half-drowsy servants prepare the horses to attach them to a carriage. Their usual coachman has evidently been pulled out of bed in a hurry. Kellan orders the white horse to be prepared as well. The stableboys point out to the pasha that the horse is kept in a separate pen because it is not yet tamed, so it is impossible to take it out because it would try to escape. The Grand Druid tells the grooms not to worry and approaches the horse's trough, where he spills his hypnotic powder. One of his men throws a pile of salt near the fence, and the horse comes to lick it with gusto. After a while of licking, he gets thirsty and approaches the trough. The fine powder dissolved in the water has an almost immediate effect and the horse gets high. At that point, one of his people puts a bite into him and takes him out of the pen. The animal is now docile. Having attached the horses behind the carriage, the procession sets off and strolls through the deserted city as it did the night before, arriving in front of the now-completed mausoleum. The construction site is silent, and there are only two guards at the entrance together

with their watch commander. As they near, the Grand Druid makes his identity known from within the carriage and asks if he could take a glance inside, as the fog had kept him from entering the night prior. This time, too, he is answered that the Khan's order is not to let anyone pass. In the meantime, the cat, still in Kellan's lap, hisses as if it had seen a mouse and rushes out of the window and into the alleys of the medina. But it is Kellan who, mentally, has ordered him to run far away, make a few speedy detours, and then return. The Pasha pretends to be worried about his cat and immediately orders the coachman to run and fetch him. The man promptly gets out of the carriage box and chases after the cat. When he is no longer in sight, the Grand Druid gets out of the carriage, pulls out the dual-pieces flute without the ouroboroi, and begins to intone the right melody. The guards enter a state of space-time hallucination and remain as if suspended in a bubble of thoughts and dreams. When it is clear that the spell is taking effect, Kellan slowly stops playing and, with the last notes, seals the bubble around the guards. They will only awaken when he bursts that bubble. At this point he orders his men to bring the horse inside and place it right under the dome. The order is then to all get out, close the doors. and leave him alone with the horse. One of them asks what to do if someone passes by or the coachman returns and sees the guards in that catatonic state. Kellan responds that there's no cause for concern, as the cat, having returned after losing its pursuer, will be keeping vigil at the entrance. With its silicon claws, it can easily slit the throat of a human being. Should the coachman or a passerby ask too many questions or see too much, a tragic accident will befall him. When all the preparations are complete, with the horse already positioned and him alone in the building, Kellan starts to play the flute with the melody

in reverse. As the music proceeds, the Dark Forces of Nature give the first signs of their presence in the form of electrostatic discharges descending from the dome. The music gradually increases in intensity, and the forces of the earth bubble up from beneath, creating mini-earthquakes. Then, at maximum power, a plasma discharge in the sky is captured by the dome and poured down below as earth forces explode from the floor. Both energy flows hit the horse, whose cells slowly turn from biological to silicon. As the chaos caused by the meeting of the natural forces calms down, Kellan steps closer to the horse, which, to the touch, feels like metal even though its outer appearance has remained the same. The horse is now under the Grand Druid's orders. Someone starts knocking incessantly on the door, interrupting Kellan's amazed ecstasy as he realizes he has lingered too long inside the mausoleum. It is time to get out. The city has heard the tremors and seen the thunder and lightning in the sky. They must also have seen the thunderbolt of plasma that struck the dome. Sooner or later, subjects and servants of the khan will be on the spot. In a hurry he gets out with the horse and reaches the guard post. The horse is tied up again behind the carriage, and everyone gets back on either the horses or the carriage as if they had just arrived. From the window, the Grand Druid with a hand gesture opens the bubble and slowly brings the guards, whose minds are as if emptied of all memory, back to the present. Immediately the Grand Druid and the others pretend to have rushed to the scene after hearing thunder and seeing a bright flash of lightning strike the dome. The guards do not know what he is talking about, and the Grand Druid points out the damaged dome to them. In the meantime, people begin to leave their homes worried and rush to the mausoleum's enclosure. Kellan, pretending to take charge, imposes himself as pasha of the

empire and representative of the sultan. He orders to be let through because he wants to enter the building to assess the extent of the damage. The watch commander makes a bow to the pasha and asks him to follow him while the people outside crowd around and talk about what they have just heard and felt. Inside the mausoleum, the soldier's dismay is great. The dome has cracked slightly at the top and is completely blackened on the inside. The floor in the center of the room is ripped up just below the apex of the dome. While they stand there open-mouthed, the Vizier of the Khan arrives, and he, too, is stunned. He asks the Pasha what happened, and Kellan tells him that they were outside admiring the newly completed building when they felt earth tremors and then saw lightning fall on the dome. The Vizier immediately sends a messenger to inform the Khan while he listens to the story of the guards who, not to look like fools, also confirm that they saw and heard the tremors and the thunder. Meanwhile, the messenger returns with orders for the Vizier. The building site must be reopened immediately, so the craftsmen and workmen must get to work at once. Their work has to be fully finished by the next day. The Pasha, noticing that the coachman is returning in a daze, informs the Vizier that it is time for him to return to the palace. The Pasha summons the man, who apologizes for not having found the cat. But the Pasha tells him not to worry because the cat has already returned alone and shows it to him. The driver looks relieved. For the rest, he was too busy hunting for the feline, fearing reprisals, to see or notice anything. They set off again. At the palace, they find the Khan and the others who have come running back from the banquet to see what has happened. The Pasha calms the Khan by confirming that it was not a surprise attack by the Russians. Rare natural and celestial events triggered that mess. The Khan says

he is relieved but prefers to go in person to make sure. Brooke, a little tipsy from the banquet, would like to go out too but then opts to go to rest.

Set 14

Early morning preparations for the huge ceremony have been in full swing at the palace. Marlowe, O'Hara, Russel, and Wayne are gathered in the apartments of the Grand Druid. Kellan announces that they must return to Constantinople as soon as possible. He calls Frog and orders him to go and tell the Khan that their departure has been brought forward to today as soon as the ceremony is over, and therefore they will not be attending the inaugural banquet. Reasons of state require him to return to the capital as soon as possible. The sultan will also be pleased about this, as he will meet his beautiful young bride sooner. Frog must remind the khan that his daughter should be ready for the journey immediately after the ceremony. Frog leaves the room and goes to the vizier's office. When Frog is too far away to hear, the Grand Druid explains the plan he developed during the night. The assilication of war animals is fundamental for the success of their enterprise to awaken and free the other imprisoned druids and then wipe out the Vikindians. Even if Kellan has assilicated the animal, he can't know if it's suitable as a warhorse, if it has stamina, how and how much it runs, or if it's compatible with the way druids ride. In order to ascertain its suitability as a warhorse, it must be subjected to extreme stress. As pasha and creditor of a favor from the sultan, he will ask for a major horse race to be organized. This would be an excellent test to evaluate the horse's potential. However, even if the horse fails the test, he is

still interested in the process of animal assilication. Assilicated animals do not drink, eat, or produce manure, and they never get tired. What's more, it is impossible to hurt them, and they are obedient. So having a stable of these horses would be useful to them in any case. Even if Kellan has all the gold he needs to build a thousand more domes like the one in Ganja, he can't build them at will because that would draw attention to himself. Building one in Nisyros would reveal the island's secrets. The Vikindians would then unmask his entire organization and start hunting him down. It's true that he has the flutes, but they are not enough to defeat the Vikindians, who would eventually prevail over him. Only when the golden horn is in his hands will he be able to face them openly. Therefore, Ganja and his dome must come under the direct control of the Druids. There is a way to do this. During the horse race that will take place on their return to Constantinople, the Druids will kill the sultan and blame it on Dunya. Kellan will buy the loyalty of the other pashas, the vizier, the eunuchs and the high imperial officials by showering them with gold and precious stones. They won't say anything when, with a palace coup, the Grand Druid takes the place of the deceased sultan. At that point, as head of the imperial army, he will invade Ganja and depose the Khan because he is accused of having killed the sultan through his daughter. Ganja will become an exclusively imperial territory with the sultan himself as its head. The mausoleum will then pass under the control of the Druids, who will transform that building into a huge factory of silicon horses. If the horses are also suitable for combat, which remains to be seen, with his fully equipped silicon army, and with the political and diplomatic power of the Ottoman empire, it will be easy for the Druids to dictate conditions not only to Vikindians but to the whole world. At the appointed time, the

khan, his officials, his daughter, and the guests gather in the palace courtyard and are ready for the parade. They go outside. A screaming crowd welcomes the royal procession as it parades through the main streets of the city in all its splendor. When they arrive in front of the monumental complex, a sea of people awaits them, applauding and cheering. The sultan climbs onto a specially prepared platform, and silence falls immediately. The khan makes his speech recalling the suffering and hardships of war, then remembers the many who fell in the wars against the Russian infidels and, amidst tears and applause, inaugurates the complex. The first to enter is the khan, followed immediately by the pasha and Brooke, and then by the rest of the guests. Kellan, looking at the dome and the floor, which are as pristine as new, is amazed at how, in just one night, everything has been put back in order.

Set 15

Back at the palace, they find the caravan of horses and carts ready to leave for the return journey. The Grand Druid notices that his carriage is not there yet. They inform him that, due to safety concerns, they must traverse Iran, a route exclusively accessible by horseback. It is a moment of panic and general embarrassment. In fact, the Grand Druid can't ride. An irate Kellan orders Frog to come closer. The Grand Druid takes the boy aside and explains the situation: he can't ride and therefore needs a mount that's easy and safe. Frog thinks about it, then remembers having seen a rather sturdy and very placid pony in the stables. It's the horse that belonged to Dunya when she was a child. It will be fine for a beginner. The pasha, trying to

maintain a composure befitting his rank, asks the khan if it is possible to have that little horse. Without raising an objection, the khan gives the order to saddle the pony and make it available to the Pasha. With severe embarrassment, the pasha gets on the little horse. Frog reassures him, telling him that all he has to do is sit tight and hold on. The horse will be attached with a long rope to Frog's saddle, and he will proceed ahead of the group to avoid accidents or unexpected movements of the animal. At the same time, the long rope's length will allow the Grand Druid to always be surrounded by his armed men. The pasha forbids anyone from riding the prized horse, even if it appears docile. The excuse is that the horse is still untamed and therefore impure. It will first have to take a purifying bath in the sacred pools for livestock in Constantinople, and then it will be allowed to be ridden. So it is strictly forbidden to approach the horse because it is a religious matter. The pasha is also a religious leader and therefore able to issue bans of a spiritual nature. In reality, the Grand Druid doesn't want either Dunya or her handmaidens to approach the animal. It will be O'Hara who holds the bridle and rides alongside it. Brooke is also there to greet the departing party, but he won't be leaving with them. As the diplomatic representative of the United States of America in the khanate, he has to draw up a detailed report on the region. In the next few days he will be accompanied by the vizier on a tour of the territory and especially of the Russian positions along the borders. The White House is rather concerned about Russia's expansion to the east and has requested a full report on the matter. In reality Brooke remains in Ganja to try out the dome and increase its power as the Sufi master had suggested. The khan affectionately greets his daughter, thanks the pasha, and the convoy leaves. From the start, Dunya wants to be in

front with Frog and her handmaidens. Along the way, she wants Shakespeare to be read to her, and to make the reading more captivating, she also needs a male voice. In fact, Frog will read the part of the male protagonist and Dunya that of the female protagonist, while the handmaidens will play the other characters. She has many copies of Shakespeare's works, so there's one for everyone. Frog sighs, but not with discontent. Thanks to that incomprehensible English playwright, he'll be able to stay close to Khulan. After a 15-day journey, they reach Trebizond, where the sultan himself is waiting to welcome his new bride. He says they'll sail to Constantinople on an imperial yacht provided by a prominent Italian shipowner who is very active in the Empire. They embark. During the crossing, the Sultan asks the pasha what he wants as a reward. He replies that, to celebrate the success of the mission and honor the upcoming imperial wedding, an impressive horse race should be organized, attracting horses and jockeys from all over the Empire. He has won in Ganja an exceptional wild horse that seems suitable for horse racing, and it is his wish to train it quickly and then challenge the other Arab and Ottoman breeders. The Sultan, quite amazed by the request, willingly accepts. Meanwhile, Dunya is invited by the captain to go up on the bridge to show her how to steer a ship. When they are alone, the captain asks her if she has something for him. Dunya nods and takes a package from under her dress and gives it to the commander. It had been given to her by Brooke with the request that she keep it safe and give it to the captain of the ship that would take them from Trebizond to the capital. When the man is alone, he opens the sealed package and reads its contents. As soon as he arrives in Constantinople, the captain immediately heads for a telegraph office. The news that Frog is alive and well quickly reaches

the various Vikindian chieftains, who set about recovering him. However, Brooke never really realized that the pasha is Kellan, so he avoids mentioning it in his message.

10

Chapter 11 - Costantinople

Set 1

Joe, Frances, Adonia and the others have had no news of Frog for almost a month. After doing everything in their power to find him and failing, their despair is at its peak. One morning, when they wake up, they find the large yacht that had been lingering in the archipelago for weeks moored at the dock of their house in Santorini. The Scandinavian princess disembarks, and Joe recognizes her as another of the women who had been at the Golden Bison. The noblewoman does not waste words. She tells them that Frog is alive and invites them to pack quickly because, Adonia excluded, they are all leaving for Constantinople. During the crossing, the princess introduces herself. She is Louise Juliane of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg, Danish princess, eldest daughter of the new king of Denmark, and older sister of the new king of Greece. She is the chief of the Scandinavian tribe, a role that, in her family, is passed down

from mother to daughter even before royal titles. The princess, who is in her forties, had led a reserved life in the eyes of Danish high society because her parents often sent her to America to live among the Indian tribes to develop her power, learn Cherokee, learn to use the sickle, and become a knowledgeable expert in shamanic practices. When she was barely twenty, she married, in great secrecy but with the agreement of her family, the son of a Cherokee chief and great warrior named Fire Cloud. About ten years ago, at the outbreak of the war between the Apache and the United States, he had tried to act as a peacemaker between the tribes and the whites. Her husband had also managed to bring the parties together around a table under a tent, but as the negotiations were stalling, he was killed with an arrow by one of Geronimo's men, who then tried to hit the American delegates whose men were drawing their firearms. The Indian chiefs and the US military managed to save themselves, but a shootout broke out that left many dead on both sides, including the husband's murderer. Thanks to that villain, the war continues to this day. Since becoming a widow, she spends spring and summer on this yacht, sailing the Aegean Sea around Santorini looking for signs of Kellan. After what had happened in Argentina, where she too had been present, she wanted more than ever to be able to locate and capture the Grand Druid. Her theory was that he had been imprisoned in these waters, freed himself in these waters, and fled from these waters, and that he would therefore return to them in some way. But she had never found any trace of him, even though she was the one who discovered, bought back, and donated the metal flute to the Smithsonian. Her power was to distinguish the fake from the real. Buyers from major European museums had contacted her several times for

advice on the authenticity of their purchases. There is one last anecdote. In 1761, when Kellan freed himself, her great-grandmother, Princess Charlotte of Denmark, was in Athens after visiting her husband, the ambassador, in Constantinople. Kellan, having returned to human form, must have passed through that city before embarking for who knows where. If her great-grandmother Carlotta had met Kellan and recognized him, either in Piraeus or on the ship she had taken to return to Europe, she would have killed him with her sickle, which she always kept in her hair, just like she does. But unfortunately she didn't spot him.

Set 2

Joe, Frances, and the others arrive in Constantinople on the princess's yacht and moor at the quay reserved for the boats of foreign dignitaries. The noblewoman greeted them and wished them good luck. If they needed her, they knew where to find her. She would be staying in the imperial suite of the Sultania Bosphorus hotel, a stone's throw from Topkapi. She, like her great-grandmother, is still a diplomat and, in her case, sister of two European kings. She must behave as befits her rank. Joe and the others will be staying elsewhere. During the voyage, the princess had sent a message to the Danish embassy by carrier pigeon, asking them to inform Mr Mark Ronton of Joe's arrival and to ask him if he would be willing to host both Joe and the others. A few days later, the answer came back affirmatively. It had been Joe's father's idea to ask Ronton to take Joe and the others into his home. Ronton, who is well-connected at the palace and in the upper echelons of the Ottoman hierarchy,

could have helped them in their quest for the horn and in their attempt to free Frog. The McAllans have known Ronton for years because he is a loyal customer of theirs and often buys racehorses from them. Mark's father was a horse broker and worked for rich English stables, including the royal one. His son had decided to export the business to the Ottoman Empire and, through diplomatic contacts, had become a supplier of thoroughbred horses for the wealthiest families in the Middle East. It seems that having an American horse is very fashionable among the empire's high society. This is why Ronton often buys from the McAllans, whose name has become a brand even on the shores of the Mediterranean. Ronton is close friends with Ethan because of the horse races that Mark also likes to indulge in. But, unlike others, he often wins. At the port, they take their leave of the princess, who gets into a luxurious carriage that the hotel makes available to its most distinguished guests. Waiting for Joe and the others is an ordinary carriage. The coachman has a sign that reads "McAllan" so that his passengers can recognize him. Joe, in the carriage, thinks that the whole thing is a trick he's seen before, and during the journey he tries to trap the coachman. He even uses some Cherokee words he learned from Frog, but nothing seems to happen. The driver only speaks Turkish, and with the little English he knows, he can only say that he doesn't speak English. On the road, they notice numerous town criers reading some kind of announcement to groups of people gathered around them. Finally, the carriage enters the gate of the garden of an enormous villa that directly faces the Golden Horn. They are welcomed by a Middle-Eastern butler dressed in Ottoman style who tells them that their luggage has already arrived and has been taken to their rooms. The man, who speaks decent English, adds that Ronton Effendi is

away on business but will return in the evening to have dinner with them. In the meantime, the guests can refresh themselves with a small buffet of Turkish specialties, then go up to their rooms to rest, wash, and wait for the evening. At 9 p.m. the butler rings a large gong to announce that dinner is about to be served. The guests go down to the lounge wearing their evening clothes. The butler sits down at a black grand piano and begins to play lounge music while carafes of various drinks, all non-alcoholic as their labels say, and some appetizers are placed on a table. Once Joe and the others have enjoyed their drinks and feel comfortable, Mark, dressed in a tuxedo, arrives. After greetings and introductions, as they sit down to eat, Mark asks them what they're doing in Constantinople. Before disembarking, the princess had warned them that Mark wasn't a Vikindian, so they shouldn't open their mouths too much when telling him their story. Joe replies that, as a breeder of war horses, the story of a melody that miraculously healed French and English horses at Balaklava had interested him ever since he first heard it in Washington, told by the English ambassador during a banquet at his father's house. He was so intrigued that he went to England to ask Lord Worcester questions, as he had been present that night at Balaklava and Joe had trained the nobleman's horse that was cured by the melody. But the Duke's answers were vague and evasive, so Joe decided to go to Constantinople in person to gather more evidence. The Turks were also involved in that war, and they too had heard something that night. He is here to find out. Joe then introduces Frencis as an English musician and flautist he met in Florence, who, intrigued by Joe's story about this mysterious melody, had joined him in his search together with her two French students. Mark says with amusement that he has heard many rumors, even the strangest, about that

episode. It seems that even horses and Ottoman soldiers have benefited from the magic melody. But when hearsay began to circulate about the existence of a mythical instrument capable of playing a magic melody, the Sultan publicly declared that the story was a legend and that no miracle triggered by music had occurred in the war against the Russians. He ordered his administrators to repress any attempt to further fuel the legend because it discredited the heroic victory of the Empire and its European allies against the expansionist plans of the Tsars. The only people authorized to talk about it are puppeteers and traveling storytellers. Anyway, he personally doesn't believe it. Changing the subject, they ask him what the town criers along the road to the villa were announcing. Mark replies that they are spreading the news of a grand horse race that will take place at the Constantinople racecourse in a fortnight. The race is organized and sponsored by an affluent governor of an Aegean island to celebrate the wedding of the Sultan to his ... well ... he'd forgotten the number ... let's say umpteenth wife. Mark asks them why they arrived in Constantinople on a private yacht belonging to the sister of the King of Greece. Joe replies that they met the woman in Santorini after a tragedy had occurred. Frog, an Indian boy that Joe had taken with him from one of his ranches, had gone missing at sea in Santorini, and all trace of him had been lost. Word spread that a boy speaking a non-European language had been fished out of the sea by some Ottoman ship and had then been sold to a slave trader. The princess, with her yacht, had taken part in the islanders' search for Frog at sea and, moved by his disappearance, had alerted all the Danish diplomatic offices both in Greece and in the Ottoman Empire with the request to provide any useful information to find the boy. They all replied that she should try to look for

him in Constantinople because the slave market in the Ottoman capital is the ideal place to sell a young American Indian, as he would be paid more there. This is why the princess had given them a lift and had stopped in the city to assist them in their search for the boy. Mark then advises them to visit the slave market the next morning, but to do so they would need a guide/interpreter. He knows just the man. Mark writes a note and passes it to the butler. The butler stands at the door and blows a whistle. In no time at all, a young boy comes running up, takes the message, collects a coin, and then runs off. Half an hour later, the boy returns with an answer. Mark reads it and announces that the answer is positive so that tomorrow morning, when the muezzin calls the faithful to prayer, they should be ready.

Set 3

In the morning, everyone finds oriental-style clothes in their room. The butler, following Mark's instructions, prepared these outfits because they can't go around asking questions in Constantinople dressed as Europeans. Women in particular would attract too much attention. For breakfast, they all meet downstairs in their new disguises. Frances and Odette with their veils look rather funny to the two men, but they look funny to the girls because of the turbans on their heads. Immediately after breakfast at the villa, a man who is undoubtedly an Ottoman appears and, dressed in Ottoman style, he introduces himself to Joe and the others speaking a very strict Turkish that none of them understand. Frances approaches Joe and whispers in his ear her doubts about whether this guy is the right person to guide

them through the medina: he doesn't even speak their language. Frances doesn't finish her sentence when the man, approached by Mark, starts speaking upper-class American English— a way of speaking English that only those Americans who studied in England have, and that can't have been learned in any local school. Seeing the bewilderment on his friends' faces, Mark smiles, and when the man removes his turban and fake beard, he introduces them to Edward Herbert Brooke, businessman and honorary consul of the United States in Trebizond on the Black Sea. He has just returned from a diplomatic mission in Armenia. Joe, behind the masquerade, recognizes the diplomat who was with them on the steamship and at the dinner in Ireland. Brooke apologizes for the charade but was curious to try out some linguistic tricks he had picked up on his last trip. If they didn't recognize him as a European, even the Turks wouldn't perceive him as such. Then he reminds Joe of the ocean crossing and the dinners at the captain's table. Brooke is also a Vikindian and a tribal chief. He is the tribal chief of the Vikindians of Anatolia and continental Greece, and his power is that of appearing to be a local wherever he is: skin color, language, clothes, and knowledge of the place. Just for the sake of it, Brooke puts on a little show, imitating accents and speech from all over the empire. Seeing that Joe feels awful about having lied to him at dinner, Mark tells everyone not to worry about their cover. He's not Vikindian, but like his father before him, he knows about the existence of their people and keeps it a secret. He knows all of Kellan's story and also knows why Joe, Frances, Theo, and Odette are in Constantinople. They are looking for the golden horn and are trying to rescue Frog, the nephew of a Yellowstone tribe chief. Now, however, they must leave if they want to reach the market before rush hour, when many slaves will already

have been bought and taken away. Before leaving and going into the city, Brooke asks them to remember a few rules. The women will have to cover their faces with veils and will always have to walk behind the men. Frances would like to protest, but Brooke reminds her that we are in an Islamic country and not in Europe; therefore, the local customs must be respected. Brooke also asks to be treated as a guide, not an equal, and to be called Osman. This way they won't arouse suspicion. Brooke knows that Frog is a pasha's slave and that he is probably now imprisoned in the Galata Tower. But he can't reveal this. If he did, the first thing Joe and the others would do would be to go to the tower. And it's not really advisable for a western tourist to knock on the door of one of the most powerful pashas in the empire and demand that he set one of his slaves free. Diplomacy will take care of freeing Frog. He had already informed the right people to activate the appropriate diplomatic channels. Accordingly, Brooke plays dumb and pretends he knows nothing about the boy.

Set 4

When they arrive at the medina, they find it strangely deserted. There is no one around, and the stalls where slaves are put on display are deserted. Brooke asks a doughnut seller why. The man replies that today is the birthday of the Sultan's dear departed mother. On the days that this anniversary falls, it is forbidden to trade in human beings anywhere in the Empire. Brooke suggests they all go to the souk. Somewhere among the rumors of the merchants, the gossip of the old women, and the legends of the storytellers, they would find something. A slave

from the American Indies? A magic horn that cures horses? The only way to find answers to these questions is to immerse themself in the Grand Bazaar. The market is a labyrinth of alleys and lanes with stalls on both sides of the street and a constant stream of people passing through it. Here and there, coffee and tea rooms, trattorias, and little restaurants open onto the streets. With Brooke's guidance, they manage to visit the most absurd places in the commercial district, meeting the most famous barroom talkers and the most gossipy women in the city. They learn that among the slaves for sale or those recently sold, there is no American Indian. But the sultan's bride, Dunya, has been seen arriving in the city with her handmaidens. They are expert horsewomen, and they put on a show upon their arrival in the city with a series of equestrian feats. In the group there was a younger maid who enjoyed performing acrobatics with the horse together with a page boy with olive skin who was a phenomenon on the saddle. That boy is certainly not Asian, so he could be the one they are looking for. But no one knows who he was or what he was doing there. However, if he was with them, it would be challenging to find him because Ottoman aristocratic palaces are impenetrable. As for the magic horn, it is told them repeatedly that it never existed and that it is forbidden to talk about it by order of the sultan, but with a wink, they point to a famous puppeteer who has a small theater in a remote corner of the souk. If anyone in the city knows the latest and most incredible stories, it's him. The entrance to the puppet theater is a dark hole in a secluded alleyway. But thanks to his resourcefulness and his very fluent Turkish, Brooke manages to find it. They enter and find a crowd of children watching spellbound as two bands of puppets challenge and fight each other on stage. One group dresses as Janissaries, while the other

dons blue European uniforms. The blue group is overwhelming the Janissaries when a spectacular incursion of horses ridden by soldiers in red uniforms comes to their aid, ending in a cloud of arrows and fire. The horses and riders are on the ground, dying, when a mysterious character takes out a magic flute and begins to play it. When hearing the melody played on an ocarina, the horses and riders recover and defeat the blue soldiers. The reds shake hands with the Janissaries, and all together they shout victory. The children go wild and explode in shouts of approval and applause. Joe and Frances don't even need to tell each other. What the puppeteer has staged is the story of the horn. Frances also points out to everyone that the melody played by the puppeteer with the ocarina is very similar to the horn melody, even if it's been changed somewhat. That man must know something. The show ends, the children stand up, and Osman goes over to the puppeteer who has come out from behind the scenes to greet the children and collect the donations from their accompanying adults. Osman approaches the man and tells him that his distinguished guests greatly enjoyed the show and would like to thank him very much. Brooke motions to Joe to come closer. Osman explains to the puppeteer that his guest is English and has some questions for him about the story he has just finished narrating with the puppets. Osman introduces Joe, who in the meantime has left several pounds in the donation box. The man, not at all intimidated, surprisingly begins to speak English, albeit with a strong Mediterranean accent. He says he learned English when he was young, when he was a sailor. He's a Christian Kurd and therefore has no taboos regarding the female world. Joe asks the women and Theo to come closer. Joe, avoiding direct questions, asks him where he finds the inspiration for his stories. The puppeteer says that he collects

the material for his shows by going around markets, ports, taverns and brothels. He's adept at disguising himself, and so he can sneak in anywhere, gathering information in the most improbable ways and from the most unexpected people. Frances then asks where and from whom he gathered the rumors that became the narrative elements of the story he has just finished recounting. The man tries to deflect the question by saying that he has more amusing anecdotes about how he constructed some of his previous stories. According to Joe, the man will never speak because he doesn't want to risk violating the Sultan's order, especially with foreigners who could be spies. But Frances surprises everyone by asking the man to pass him his ocarina. The puppeteer takes the wind instrument out of his pocket, and this time she plays it using the right notes of the Druidic melody. The man is beaming. The puppeteer admits that he got the ideas for his latest show from the Janissaries who had returned from the Crimea. He had found them off duty smoking opium in a den in the port. Under the influence of the drug, they had told him about the massacre of the English cavalry and their miraculous recovery. Even the Ottoman camp had heard that music, and, incredible as it may seem, even their animals and their wounded had started to feel better. One of them, with a passion for music, had committed the melody to memory and had hummed it to him. He then rearranged it based on what he remembered. That's all he knows. He advises them to try and find firsthand information. The puppeteer invites them to go beyond the Bosphorus to the Galata neighborhood. In the taverns in that area, many veterans of the Ottoman army hang out smoking and drinking coffee, and many of them were in Balaklava. They could try talking to them. The puppeteer accompanies them to the door and waves goodbye as they leave.

His trained eye immediately spots a shadow following the little group stealthily. The puppeteer closes the door and takes off his turban, revealing a head of very blond hair. He is not a Kurd; he is a Vikindian from Lombardy and a Knight of Malta. He arrived in the city a few months ago on the orders of Count Otto Von Eckstein for unspecified intelligence tasks. Emilio speaks Turkish, which he learned during his years of service with the Order of Malta, engaged in combating Barbary piracy. Emilio has replaced the puppeteer, paying him a long pilgrimage to Mecca and to the other holy places of Islam between Egypt and Morocco. He won't be back for a few years. During his stay in Constantinople, he heard all the latest rumors and gossip in the empire and reported them to his superiors. Now, however, he has been given another task. He has to spread the word throughout Constantinople that the horn is in the city. Emilio doesn't know why, but he's diligent in obeying. In the last few days, the Danish princess and chieftainess had come to visit him, warning him that Joe, Frances, and the others would visit him accompanied by Brooke. The group is certainly being followed by Kellan's men. Emilio must find out who is following them like a shadow and where and to whom they report ; this would allow them to know where the Grand Druid is hiding. Emilio changes his clothes, darkens his face with makeup, puts on a fake beard, wraps a turban of a different color around his head, and heads for the Bosphorus to cross to the other side via a shorter and different route from that taken by Joe and the others.

Set 5

Just outside the theater, Brooke reminds everyone to avoid speaking English loudly in the street. To get to the ferry landing stage, they have to cross a rather dangerous area, and if it were to become known that they are Europeans, they could receive unwanted attention from some cutthroat thief of which that area is teeming with. If and when it's necessary, then only he will speak. If there is anything to be said, it will be whispered in the ears, as is done in Ottoman high society. After all, their clothes are those of the Constantinople middle class, and therefore their behavior will not seem strange. Even when crossing the Bosphorus, it's better to remain silent. Then in Galata they'll be a little freer to communicate, even if it's still preferable to do so in a low voice. It's true that the neighborhood is inhabited by the families of rich merchants, Ottoman politicians, and aristocrats, and that there are also various residences where Europeans live, some embassies, and even Christian churches. There are at least four Catholic churches and one Anglican church. So it's not unusual to see and hear people speaking English in the streets of Galata. But the neighborhood also has several poor areas, and there are many people who invade the richer streets every day looking for victims to rob. This is particularly true if the victim speaks Christian languages or is dressed in a Western style. The criminals are very quick; they drag the unfortunate person into an alley, rob them, and stab them to death. The Europeans who live in the neighborhood all go out with an armed escort. As soon as they land on the other side, they come across a trained bear and its owner, who is playing an accordion. The bear can dance, and his companion plays

lively, captivating music. The music is played faster and faster, and the bear dances even more quickly with each change of tempo. The dancing bear approaches Frances, and she feels a little intimidated. Without saying a word, the owner lets her know that she shouldn't be afraid and that she should follow him in the dance. The bear holds out his paw to Frances as if to ask her to dance, and she, under the amused gaze of her companions and with Brooke holding one hand on the sickle he's wearing under his clothes, agrees to grant him the dance. The man starts playing a waltz, and between twirls with the bear, Frances catches a glimpse of the sign of a shady café out of the corner of her eye. Frances recognizes it immediately: it's a bison. The musician realizes that the woman has seen the sign, while he is also aware of the position of the mysterious shadow observing the scene. The musician finishes with a little tune, and the bear stops dancing. The musician, while Brooke leaves him some coins, makes faces and bows to thank Frances and to go off into the maze of alleys in Galata. Frances shows the sign for the tavern to her companions, and they all agree to go there. The fact that an American bison appears on the sign of a café in Turkey is rather bizarre. Brooke agrees. The place could have some Vikindian influence and therefore be the ideal place to gather the information they need. Meanwhile, the bear and the musician disappear around the corner. When they are out of sight, the bear's fur opens, and two dwarves come out from inside what was only a costume. Emilio pays them, and the two dwarves run away happily. Emilio picks up his fur and accordion and quickly goes to the back of the café, where a small bison drawn on the door indicates that this is the café's service entrance. Once inside he winks at the owner, who is in fact a Vikindian, and quickly dresses up as an Ottoman waiter

with a fez and two big mustaches that hang down to the corners of his mouth. The café is called Barış'ın Bizon Cafesi, which translates as Barış's Bison Café. This is an unusual moniker for a café located in the heart of the Galata district. Frances insists on sitting on the patio in front of the coffee shop, which is surrounded by flowering plants and where all the tables look straight at the Galata Tower. Once seated, Brooke remains silent and seems thoughtful about the place. After a short wait, the waiter appears. Emilio, disguising his voice to the point of being unrecognizable, asks what they would like, and Brooke replies that he should bring Turkish coffee for the men while the ladies would like hot tea. The waiter replies that the owner makes mint tea just like they do in Morocco. It's a real specialty of that place. Brooke translates into Cherokee for Frances and Odette. The waiter seems surprised to hear that language but doesn't say a word. Brooke then translates the ladies' reply back to him, and it's more than enthusiastic. The waiter leaves, and Odette points out to Brooke that using Cherokee and not English was a brilliant idea. Brooke replies that it is estimated that, between languages and dialects, more than one hundred idioms are spoken in the Ottoman Empire. And almost all of them are mutually incomprehensible. Cherokee must have seemed to that man to be one of the many languages of the Empire. It is certainly better than using English and French, which would have immediately unmasked them. Inside, the owner of the café prepares the orders. There is no fire in his coffee shop because he doesn't need one. He has the power to bring water to the boil simply by touching the container. In an instant, the orders are ready and already arranged on the tray. Baris tells Emilio that, since Brooke is here and he is his chief, he has to go and greet him. But he won't say anything about Emilio. The

two of them leave the bar with the orders and a basket of Turkish sweets to accompany the drinks. Baris, speaking in Turkish, makes himself known to Brooke, who is pleased to see him. Brooke explains to the others in Cherokee that Baris had previously left Europe to go and live among the tribes in South America, and he didn't know that he had returned. Theo translates for Joe. As Emilio serves at the table, it strikes him that two shadows, not one, are observing them. His suspicion is confirmed when one of the figures detaches itself and strides toward the tower.Frances plucks up courage and asks in Cherokee if, thanks to his customers, Baris has managed to gather any information about an Indian boy who was traveling with them and who, after disappearing, was seen in Constantinople during the welcoming procession of the sultan's new wife. Emilio intervenes in English; he approaches the center of the table and whispers that perhaps Frog is a prisoner in the tower. Noticing the surprise on the faces of those present, Emilio explains that two shadows have been following them since they arrived in the city. One of those who was stalking them has just entered the tower enclosure while another shadow is still in place spying on them. Whoever lives in the tower is interested in them and their research. So he could also be Frog's jailer. What's more, both of them could be in the city right now. The reason for this deduction is simple. Perhaps they haven't heard yet, but there are persistent rumors in the city about the presence of the magical Balaklava horn. While still bent over the table, Emilio, to prove he's a Vikindian, shows everyone the handle of the sickle he's got under his shirt. Joe asks who lives in the tower. Baris replies that not much is known because it's a military secret. The Galata Tower is one of the cornerstones of the city's defense. An unidentified pasha oversees it and maintains an

elite military garrison there. But that's all that's known. The Empire's military secrets are well protected, and those who pry too much end up being liquidated. However, there is one detail. The same shipping company, called Ottoman, always brings the supplies to the tower. Joe and Frances immediately think of that adjective, which is what Frances remembers of the little she knows about Kellan's organization. Only he could have had an interest in having them followed to get to the golden horn. And it wouldn't be surprising if he had taken Frog prisoner and then traded him in case they found the horn before him. The hypothesis that Frog and the Grand Druid are in the Galata Tower is not far-fetched. While they are deep in thought about what to do, a young boy approaches them and pulls on Joe's jacket sleeves, asking him, in English learned from tourists, if he is Mr. McAllan. Upon hearing the affirmative answer, the boy runs off in the direction of the road and waves at someone. A carriage immediately reverses and heads towards the group at a brisk pace. Mark gets out of the overturned carriage, with two armed men standing at the back, and hurriedly tells them that he's been looking for them all over the city: Brooke, Joe, and the others are expected at the palace. Baris and Emilio tell them not to worry about Frog for the moment. From now on, they will closely monitor the tower for any signs of Frog or to confirm if Kellan and his druids are indeed residing there. Brooke tells the group to go ahead of him to the palace because, as they can well understand, he needs to change his clothes. He is, after all, an accredited diplomat and can't go to the sultan looking like an Anatolian shepherd. Joe, in saying goodbye to Brooke, tells him about the London orphanage where Frances was brought up and the word 'Ottoman' that Frances remembers being linked to Kellan's network. He asks him to get in touch with his father

immediately and pass on the news. Fergus would take care of the rest. Brooke nods, promising to send a telegram to Washington immediately. He will send it from the American embassy as soon as he returns home. When he is in Constantinople, he lives in the embassy annex, which is reserved for members of the US diplomatic corps when they are away from their headquarters. The carriage speeds away.

Set 6

They arrive at Topkapi. The palace attendants are waiting for them at the door reserved for visitors to the officials' offices. These offices are located in a different wing of the palace from the one occupied by the sultan. They are greeted by the eunuch who is in charge of protocol. The man speaks fluent English and explains to them that to enter the palace, they must be made presentable. The man claps his hands, and four servants present themselves. Two maids approach Frances and Odette while two servants stand next to Theo and Joe. The eunuch says that first the guests will have to go through a purifying bath, and then their clothes will be changed and their hair styled. At that point they will be ready to meet the pasha. The two French brothers, unsure of what to do, ask Joe and Frances in a low voice what they can do with their sickles. They can't hide them when they undress, and they probably won't be allowed in with those weapons. The eunuch responds without prompting. The official says there is no problem with their sickles. They are allowed to keep them during the audience. This statement creates general astonishment as the servants accompany the guests to the bathrooms and wardrobe. Mark, who has already

dressed for the reception, will wait for them in the waiting room where delicious tea is served. The women and men are taken to two separate rooms, each with a bathtub full of scented water. Their clothes are taken away and then burnt so that they don't contaminate the palace with the impurity of the city streets. After their ablutions, they are given new, clean turkish clothes, and when they are dressed, the handmaidens arrange the two women's hair while the two male servants tidy up Joe and Theo's beards and hair. When they are ready, they are accompanied to the door that leads to the presence of the pasha. Mark is already there, ready to enter. The doors open. They enter the reception hall expecting to find an olive-skinned Turk with a ring in his ear, like the eunuchs. Instead, to their enormous surprise, the man is blond, bearded, with long hair, fair skin, and blue eyes. The man introduces himself as Olaf, the pasha of the Sultan's personal guard, which is made up entirely of Vikindians. Seeing his guests' surprise, Olaf explains that only Vikindians can be part of the Sultan's personal guard. It all began with the Byzantine Empire. In 988, the emperor Basil II wanted a regiment of Vikings as his elite guard because they were highly skilled in combat, but in 1453, when the Eastern Roman Empire fell, they were dismissed. Two centuries later, Sultan Osman II, having learned of the existence of the Vikindians and their powers, wanted them at court to take care of his security, promising never to reveal their existence and their special abilities to anyone. This agreement has endured to this day. Olaf shows everyone his sickle, adding that this is the special weapon that the Vikindian guards use to fight instead of a scimitar. Olaf asks Mark the reason behind his request to meet him. Mark explains that his guests are also Vikindians, and in Constantinople, they are looking for two things: their friend Frog, an Indian from the

Rocky Mountains who seems to have ended up as a slave to some rich pasha, and, of course, they are looking for the golden horn on behalf of the chieftains. Olaf would like to ask them some preliminary questions, but just at that moment Brooke arrives, washed, combed, and dressed in an impeccable diplomatic frock coat with a tuba and bow tie. He is an accredited diplomat that is at home in the palace. He couldn't come dressed as Ozman. However, he is keen to point out that the sultan's guard belongs to the Scandinavian tribe and not to the Greek and Anatolian one, of which he is the chief. Joe and the others tell Olaf and Brooke what they have understood so far. Frances, who for years was under the orders of the Grand Druid, testifies that Kellan has built, over the decades, an intricate organization with multiple ramifications. Thanks to today's investigations, they have managed to deduce that the Druids and Kellan might be living in the Galata Tower. However, there is no certainty due to military secrecy. Olaf replies that he knows the Tower has been entrusted to a certain Vadim Burham Pasha, a very wealthy Ottoman dignitary who lives in London. The tower has been in his family for two generations, and Vadim also inherited from his father the governorship of the island of Nysiros, which had been granted to him by previous sultans. Could he be the Grand Druid? If so, is Nysiros the island that all the Vikindians are trying to identify? But who better than Brooke could confirm this, given that he traveled as far as Ganja with the Pasha in question? Brooke remains stunned. During those weeks of traveling, he hadn't realized he had been side by side with the Grand Druid. They ask him if he has seen Frog. Brooke confesses. Yes, the boy was with them, but the druids never allowed the boy to speak with him. However, immediately after the trip, he had informed the other chiefs of the matter through a series of cables

entrusted to Dunya. The tribal chiefs are currently deciding what to do. This is why he didn't tell them he knew about the boy's fate: he wanted to avoid them making rash decisions. Olaf says he agrees with Brooke about his actions because Vadim Burham is a high-ranking state official that has the full trust of the Sultan. What's more, the Sultan owes him a favor. Attacking him head-on would mean drawing unwanted attention to the Vikindians, which could compromise the very existence of the Vikindian people. To free Frog, they will have to play a very delicate game in which every move will have to be studied in detail. Or the Sultan will have everyone's head cut off. They then ask him about the horn. Does he know if it really is in Constantinople, and, if so, does he know who has it? Olaf confirms that even in the corridors of the palace, there are whispers about this miraculous instrument and how it has been used in the Crimea and, it seems, even in Italy. However, Olaf has to disappoint them. Apart from the rumors, there is nothing concrete about the horn except for legends and ballads of storytellers. Nevertheless, his men keep their ears open. As soon as he has something concrete, he will inform them immediately.

Set 7

In the meantime the Grand Druid walks impatiently in his room inside the tower. He is waiting for news from his men scattered across the city. As the unstoppable popular rumor about the horn in Constantinople has reached him, for sure the news will have reached those dimwits led by McAllan and their so-called masterminds. So the druids he sent to shadow

them perhaps have discovered something. Kellan gazes out the window. The architectural complex of the tower is a mix of warehouses, residences, and barracks housing a garrison of Janissaries, all of whom are, of course, druids. Some of them are practicing with daggers in the courtyard below. Unfortunately, Kellan was unable to construct his usual underground megalithic circle because its construction would have interfered with the proper functioning of the mechanism of the chain. The powerful hydraulic winch that lifts the enormous links of forged iron, weighing several tons, is firmly anchored to the rock below with supports that go at least twenty meters deep. Building an underground temple beneath or next to it could have compromised the stability of the tower itself. The structure has been used several times during wartime, but anyway it is rare for the Sultan to order the closure of the Bosphorus. Thus, the machinery is operated only once a year to keep it in working order. Watching it in motion is always a spectacle. Kellan sees Frog heading toward the stables and calls him inside. Then he shuts the window. Frog, inwardly annoyed, has no choice but to go to that monster instead of tending to the horses and finding a moment of peace. There is no way for him to slack off, even briefly. The Grand Druid is always watching him closely. Although he is free to wander around the tower, he has orders to always stay within earshot of the Grand Druid and cannot hide when he calls. Moreover, to avoid revealing that the tattoo on him does not work, he is forced to obey submissively, just like the other druids. Running away would be foolish on his part. He does not know the city, and the druids would easily find him. He might attempt an escape toward the sea and, on the Bosphorus shore, hope to find a dolphin willing to carry him away. But the Grand Druid is no fool and keeps his killer

whales patrolling the coast. They would devour him and the dolphin in the blink of an eye. While climbing the tower's stairs, Frog cannot help but notice yet again that the windows accessible to him are sealed with iron bars. But one of these grilles has some heavy slats that, having loosened over time, can be removed. Frog frequently spends hours by that window during the day, distracting himself by observing the crowded streets of the district, searching for any sign of Joe and the other Vikindians. Frog barely has time to reach the landing of the Grand Druid's chamber before he sees him already descending the stairs. In a firm tone, Kellan orders him to follow to the underground levels. When downstairs Frog sees the Grand Druid taking out his personal set of keys and unlocking the reinforced iron door leading to the Chain Room. The room is three stories high and has no windows, except for a small opening—ten centimeters high and one meter wide—that overlooks the sea. In the center, there is a control station with a large lever and a series of smaller ones. The Grand Druid explains to Frog that this is the command post that operates the chain across the Bosphorus. The chain and the winch that moves it are located in a chamber carved into the rock beneath the tower's foundations, ensuring resistance to earthquakes, though its operation is controlled from above. Kellan shows Frog a hatch in the floor that leads down to the chain. He explains that once a year, the Bosphorus is closed, and the chain is fully extended to assess its condition and allow for maintenance. One of the biggest issues is that when the chain is not taut, it remains buried along the shore and submerged in the Bosphorus' bed all the way to Topkapi, making it susceptible to strong corrosive pressures. After finishing his explanation, Kellan orders Frog to grab a broom and start cleaning up, because the annual chain-raising drill will be in a

few weeks, and it will fall to Frog, when the chain is fully taut, to climb onto it and clean every link—from the tower to Topkapi—of algae and mollusks. At that moment, Marlowe arrives to report the latest news. He sees Frog and asks if he can speak in his presence. Kellan replies that it is not a problem since the boy is tattooed. Marlowe communicates what the druid sentinels watching the port had reported—that since yesterday, Joe and Frances have also been in Constantinople. They are staying with an American named Mark Ronton, who is well known in the city and across the empire as a skilled mediator in luxury horse trading. Ronton is acquainted with the McAllans but is not Vikindian. His house shows no signs of hypergrown flora. Marlowe arguments that if Joe and Frances are here, it could be for two reasons: either they also know that the horn is in the city, or Brooke has informed them about Frog. Kellan interrupts. Brooke knows that Vadim Buram is the governor of Nisiros and that he lives in London. However, Brooke cannot know that the Galata Tower is also under Vadim Buram's control because that information is a military secret, which is not revealed to Western diplomats. Therefore, Brooke must have warned them that Frog is in the hands of the Pasha, but at most, they can look for him on the island or in London—not here. There is no way they could suspect Kellan and Frog's presence in the city. Moreover, since returning from Ganja, Kellan has never appeared in public and has kept a low profile at the tower. That is why most people, including the Sultan, believe the Pasha left when the convoy of horses and armed men—who had served as an escort for the journey—departed by ship to return to Nisiros. So Joe and Frances are here not for Frog but for the horn. Frog listens carefully to the conversation, but he attempts to hide his interest by pretending to focus on cleaning the floor. O'Hara rushes in,

breathless. He had joined their tail as soon as he realized that Joe and Frances were in Galata. He reports that Ronton, dressed in ceremonial attire, came to pick up Joe and the others, likely to take them to the palace. They had been in a café not far from the tower, engaged in an intense conversation with both the owner and the waiter. Once they had left, O'Hara sat down, pretending to be a Western customer, and the waiter spoke to him in English. Through casual questioning, O'Hara learned that the horn is supposedly in the possession of a powerful Italian shipowner named Ginopaolo Parodi, who also owns warehouses and docking facilities in Constantinople.To support his claim, the waiter mentioned that Parodi had been physically present in Crimea and later in Sicily precisely during the period when the horn was said to have been played. It was Parodi's ships that transported the Piedmontese to Crimea and Garibaldi's forces to Sicily. He did not do this without compensation, as his company had already secured lucrative transatlantic contracts with France and England and is set to be granted a monopoly on maritime transport for the future Kingdom of Italy. The intervention of the horn favored the French and the English, but above all the cause of Italian unification, from which Parodi will earn a great deal of money. In short, the man also has a motive for having played the horn.Two druids knock on the iron door, requesting permission to enter. O'Hara signals them to come in and orders them to report their findings. One of them had been at the port, where sources confirmed that Parodi had been seen frequently over the past week at the docks and warehouses owned by his company in the city. He is constantly guarded by a group of Sardinian cutthroats who allow no one to approach him. The second druid reports having visited Parodi's residence, a large Italian-style villa in the Pera district, about

two kilometers from the tower. It is one of the highest villas on the hills and relatively isolated. Armed guards stand at the gate, while a patrol of riflemen with dogs makes rounds. The garden appears rather neglected, showing no signs of excessive floral growth. Neither Parodi nor his men are Vikindian. The Grand Druid orders everyone to meet in his chamber in half an hour to devise a plan to force Parodi to surrender the horn—by persuasion or by force. Action would be taken as soon as the next day.

Set 8

It is sunset at the port of Istanbul, the busiest time of the day. Fishermen prepare their nets for the next day, sailors step ashore to revel, and dockworkers flood the taverns for dinner while fish vendors offer discounts on the last of their catch to a crowd of housewives. Parodi, when in Constantinople, loves to watch the bustle from his window as the district fills with life at day's end. His company has its offices above the largest building he owns. Beneath them lies the warehouse of oriental goods, holding the most precious merchandise arriving from the East—furniture, porcelain, carpets, ivory, and exquisite shipments of silk and embroidered fabrics. That cargo is already worth a fortune, merely awaiting a vessel that will transport this wealth to America, where its value will quadruple. For that reason, the warehouse windows are reinforced with welded iron, the door is armored, and four armed guards stand watch outside. Parodi watches in surprise from his office window as the clear sky suddenly darkens with heavy clouds. Yet the crowd below seems unconcerned, carrying on with their daily

affairs. The Druids have blended into the masses, disguised as fishermen, sailors, or wanderers, while the Grand Druid, dressed in a customs officer's uniform, moves along the docks, followed by three men clad in customs uniforms. From the sea, a powerful wind begins to rise as the clouds thicken overhead. The fishermen exchange bewildered glances—such a sudden storm at this hour and season is highly unusual. The sky turns ominously dark, and flashes of lightning flicker among the clouds. Then, with a deafening crash, a massive bolt of lightning strikes the roof of the Parodi company's main building, leaving a crater that reaches down to the ground floor. The shockwave from the impact shatters the windows and blows the front door off its hinges. No one has ever seen anything like it before. Thrown to the ground by the explosion, Parodi regains his senses and struggles to exit the building as flames, ignited by the lightning's sparks, begin to spread both above and below. Fanned by the wind, the fire seems determined to consume everything. Employees and workers of Parodi trickle out of the burning structure while his bodyguards rush to his aid, escorting him to safety. The flames rise high, reaching the roof of the warehouse, while an ever-growing crowd gathers to get a better view. A detachment of firefighters and the Sultan's port police encircle the burning area. Parodi stays on the sidelines, protected by his bodyguards, who anxiously await the arrival of the armored carriage that will take their boss to safety. Meanwhile, millions of pounds are literally going up in smoke. Distant cries ring out, followed by the shrill whistles of approaching policemen. The crowd parts as a group of officers advances, preceding a carriage speeding toward the scene. The vehicle halts in the square in front of the warehouse, and the guards attempt to usher Parodi inside

without incident. However, they quickly abandon the plan upon realizing the carriage will never make it out—the crowd continues to swell around the burning warehouse. The Druids are among the onlookers, and the Grand Druid, wearing his officer's uniform, smoothly bypasses the police security cordon. He now stands near the Genoese, using his disguise to move closer while remaining under the watchful eye of the Sardinians. The reason for such intense interest from the massive crowd is that, from outside, they can see crates of untouched goods still inside. A single piece of that silk alone could be worth a fortune to a dockworker. The mob begins pressing against the police cordon, eager for plunder. Meanwhile, powerful winds scatter embers across rooftops and nearby buildings. Shouts of "Fire!" ring out from every direction, and alarm bells start echoing through the port. The crowd pushes against the policemen, who retreat with rifles at the ready, while Parodi's guards tighten their formation around their visibly concerned leader. In this fiery inferno, the mob grows more frenzied, terrified that everything will burn before they have a chance to loot it. Some officers fire warning shots into the air, but the crowd remains undeterred, continuing to force their way forward. At last, the police line breaks, and the masses surge into the warehouses, ravenous for treasures. Amid the chaos, some are consumed by the flames, while cries of triumph mix with agonized wails from within the burning buildings. Anarchy reigns. Using his disguise as an officer, the Grand Druid seizes command of the police and begins issuing orders to Parodi's men as well. Armed officers and bodyguards surround the Italian shipowner, pushing him to the side of the building to shield him from the crazed mob and the imminent collapse of the roof and floors. When the group manages to reach a relatively

calmer area, Kellan releases hypnotic powder over them, leaving the Sardinians and the officers entranced. His accompanying Druids effortlessly disarm everyone, and then the Grand Druid draws out his flute—sending them all into a deep slumber. Parodi, disoriented by the powder but still lucid, believes he is the victim of an extortion attempt by the corrupt officer and his men, though the method seems oddly unconventional. He tries to reason with them, offering as much money as they want—so long as they spare his life. Kellan smirks sardonically and replies that Parodi's money means absolutely nothing to him. He wants something else, and the only way to get it is to abduct him and take him along. Beneath the port lies a vast network of tunnels stretching in all directions. They will use those to transport him to their intended destination. Parodi doesn't understand at first, but in an instant, the Grand Druid conjures a swirling mass of earth, opening a gaping chasm in the ground that reveals what appears to be an underground passage. The vortex has left a sloping ramp of dirt leading down. Parodi is dragged down roughly, finding himself in the depths where the Druids stand waiting, their torches flickering in the darkness. Once everyone has descended, Kellan sets the vortex in motion again, sealing the opening above until only a patch of compacted earth remains. By the time the others awaken, Parodi has vanished without a trace. The fire has grown so immense that the firefighters are powerless, and among them, some have already deemed that part of the city lost. Olaf and his men arrive on the scene, sent personally by the Sultan to restore order. But by now, that section of the port is deserted as buildings and warehouses are consumed by flames. Thinking quickly, Olaf devises a plan and dispatches one of his men to Frances, requesting that she make it rain. Receiving the message, Frances

steps into her garden and summons a torrential downpour that blankets the city, extinguishing the inferno that had already begun to spread to nearby residential quarters.

Set 9

By the following day, all of Constantinople is talking about what happened the previous night. The Piedmontese ambassador to the Sublime Porte, informed of Parodi's disappearance, immediately petitions the Sultan to locate him by any means necessary. Parodi is a Knight Grand Cross of the Supreme Order of the Most Holy Annunciation, the highest honor bestowed by the House of Savoy, and a close personal friend of the King of Sardinia. Should anything happen to him, the newly unified Italy will impose an embargo on the Ottoman Empire, shutting down all trade with the Ottomans. This would spell commercial disaster for the empire, as nearly 50% of its exported goods pass through Italy. The Sultan, astonished by the disappearance of such a high-profile figure, orders the Grand Vizier to lead the investigation and entrusts Olaf and his men with the mission to find Parodi and punish those responsible for his abduction. From within the palace, Olaf coordinates the reconnaissance teams, composed of various Janissary divisions, under the supervision of the Sultan's Guard. Olaf, meanwhile, summons Joe and the others, urgently calling them to the palace to update them on the latest developments. Once everyone is gathered, Olaf thanks Frances for her intervention, without which a significant portion of Constantinople would have gone up in flames. He certainly cannot tell the Sultan that an Englishwoman—half European and half Indian—with a magical

tattoo made it rain. The Sultan, a deeply religious man, does not believe in magic. If Olaf were to tell him, he would immediately have him locked away in a criminal asylum. However, Olaf will find a way to ensure Frances receives the Sultan's gratitude. But that is not why he called them here. The first major revelation is that the Golden Horn is no longer missing—it is right here in Topkapi Palace. For now, it is locked away in a special vault inside the Harem, the palace's off-limits section. Furthermore, that wing of the building has been sealed, security has been doubled, and the Sultan has forbidden entry to anyone. No one—not even them, as palace guards—is allowed to approach. The Horn arrived the previous night. It was in the possession of a wealthy Italian shipowner, well known even here in Constantinople, who had acquired it years ago. Somehow, he learned to play it and rediscovered the ancient melody. He was the one who played it in Crimea and Sicily—he was there because the military logistics fleet belonged to him. After the fire at the port was extinguished, two officials from the Parodi Company requested an audience with the Sultan. They arrived carrying a wooden chest and a letter for the Grand Vizier. Upon reading the missive, the functionary paled and rushed to inform the Sultan. Within minutes, the two men were granted a private audience with the Sultan, bypassing all protocol. Olaf and two of his best men were in the room to ensure the Sultan's safety, in case the visitors turned out to be impostors with an assassination plot. The Sultan, uncovering the object before everyone, asked what it was. The Grand Vizier read the accompanying letter aloud. Immediately afterward, the Sultan ordered double security throughout the palace and demanded an armed escort, prepared for combat, so that he could personally carry the Horn, wrapped in fine fabric, into

the Harem, where he locked it away, out of anyone's reach. The officials explained that their employer had given them strict orders to deliver the chest personally to the Sultan, accompanied by the sealed letter. They had no knowledge of its contents—it was simply the first thing they were to do if anything happened to him. And indeed, in the fire at the port, Parodi disappeared. According to the police officers and Parodi's bodyguards, a terrible drowsiness suddenly overcame them, and they fell asleep instantly, lulled by a distant but incredibly sweet melody. Then—darkness. It seems highly likely that the kidnapping was orchestrated by Kellan. He must have discovered that Parodi had the Horn. Using the pretense of gathering information for the search, Olaf managed to gain access to the Grand Vizier's office archive this morning, where he uncovered intriguing documents. It was in 1816 that the governorship of Nysiros was entrusted to the owner of a certain Ottoman Bank in London—a banker named Omer Aziz Efendi. Assisting him in legal and legislative matters was a London-based lawyer named Russell, who, according to the elder eunuchs—those who survived the purges following each Sultan's succession—had by then become a frequent presence at the palace. By the late 1820s, Omer Aziz officially died, leaving the governorship to his son, Vadim Burham, another Londoner who had never been seen in the empire before. This new Pasha was also assisted by another lawyer named Russell, who was recorded as the son of the Russell from 1816. For a wealthy banking family to pass down control of their bank and various enterprises—including the maritime transport companythat docks at Galata—upon the father's death is legitimate. Likewise, a well-established law firm in London could reasonably be inherited from father to son. The timeline seems to add up, but there is one strange detail:

The signatures of Omer Aziz and Vadim Burham—who should be father and son—are identical, as are those of Russell senior and Russell junior. A highly suspicious coincidence. Frances explains that the Grand Druid, through his metamorphosis, has become amortal—a state beyond mortality. He possesses the power to make his followers amortal as well, transforming them into beings composed of something other than human or mammalian flesh. This would explain why, despite the official existence of two Russells and two Pashas, their signatures remained identical over a 40-year span. "But that's not all," Olaf concludes. In the very same year that Vadim Buran inherited the island, the Sultan entrusted the management of the Galata Tower to a mysterious Pasha, whose name is concealed in official records. This Pasha was responsible for personally financing the construction of the chain across the Bosphorus and the mechanism to operate it. The work began immediately thereafter. Only the wealthiest Pasha in the empire could have borne such an expense, and that Pasha could only be the governor of Nysiros. The logic is clear: Kellan and Vadim Buran are the same person. It appears that after Ganja, the Pasha returned to his island, meaning he and Frog could be there. However, the Horn's presence in the city and the kidnapping of Parodi strongly suggest that the Grand Druid is actually in the Galata Tower, where he is holding Frog and Parodi captive. Joe asks if anything can be done, but Olaf is pessimistic. Kellan, in his role as a Pasha deeply connected to the Sultan, is untouchable. The Tower is the city's most important defensive structure and the best protected. In other words, inspecting the Tower is impossible. The Grand Vizier would never grant permission, fearing he would lose his head for it. For now, it's best not to lose one's head—literally or figuratively. The Horn is safe in the

Topkapi Harem, and at least for now, Kellan won't be foolish enough to blow his cover by attempting a surprise attack on the palace. The tribal leaders have already been informed of the Horn's presence in Constantinople, and they have promised reinforcements to strengthen Olaf's already well-equipped Vikindian forces. The surroundings of Topkapi are likely filling up with Vikindians in disguise, ready to draw their sickles. Kellan, who undoubtedly has spies everywhere, cannot have missed this. So, as far as the Horn's safety is concerned, there is little reason to worry. Frog, according to Brooke's observations, is invaluable to Kellan, who keeps him close at all times. There is no need to fear for his safety—he may be a prisoner, but he is alive and well. Parodi, however, may be in greater danger once Kellan discovers he no longer has the Horn. Still, Parodi is a seasoned man, who, over a lifetime of travels, has faced the most difficult situations. He will know how to manage on his own—at least for now. At the moment, the situation is at a standstill, and there is little to be done. They must wait for either Kellan or the Sultan to make the next move. Olaf urges them to stay away from Galata and the Tower, assuring them that he will handle everything. His top priority remains recapturing Kellan, freeing Frog, and saving Parodi. Joe and Frances thank Olaf and leave the palace to return home. Before heading back, Joe asks Frances for a favor—a brief detour. They make their way to the Bosporus, arriving at the consulate of the Priory of the Knights of Malta. There, Joe shows his pin to the guard at the entrance. Without saying a word, the sergeant on duty gestures for them to follow him. He leads them into an underground chamber, guarded by two armed men. Inside, a telegraph operator is busy transmitting and receiving messages. The sergeant explains that the telegraph is directly linked to Malta and numerous other

Order outposts across the Mediterranean and Europe. Soon, they will also have connections to America. The pin Joe displayed can only be bestowed by the Grand Master, giving him the right to send confidential communications. The telegraph operator, Brother Rolf, is an elder knight who, during battle, was caught in an explosion that damaged his memory. As a result, he lost the ability to speak and can no longer write in cursive or print—he can only write in Morse code. Due to his neurological injury, he forgets what he reads or writes within minutes, ensuring the absolute secrecy of any message he transmits. As the sergeant closes the door, he tells them he will be waiting outside. Joe writes the message on a sheet of paper, signs it, and hands it to Rolf. Without hesitation, Rolf furiously taps the telegraph, and within seconds, the message is already sent: "Nysiros is the island of the Druids – Confirmed – Joe McAllan."

Set 10

After traversing several kilometers of underground tunnels, Kellan and his group emerge into the Chain Hall, and from there, they ascend toward the tower. Parodi has been bound by the hands and is being dragged and shoved roughly. Frog, who is at the window looking at Galata, hears a commotion coming from the stairs and soon finds himself face-to-face with the Grand Druid, who orders him to leave the building immediately. Frog obeys, and on his way down he crosses paths with the other druids dragging a bound man while striking the back of his neck with their hands. Parodi is taken to the room where Kellan usually receives and is tied hand and foot to a chair. The Grand Druid, first of all, wants to proceed with the tattooing, but as

soon as he claws Parodi's arm and tries to brand him, something goes wrong and the operation fails. The tattoo doesn't even imprint, despite the Genoese not being a Vikindian. Kellan tries several times again, but it's no use. The tattoo won't hold. Kellan, impatient, decides to proceed with the interrogation anyway, even though the prisoner is not completely under his power. Parodi, to the first questions, responds—as he did at the port—that he doesn't know who they are or why they kidnapped him. But if it's ransom they want, then he is extremely wealthy and can offer them any amount. The Grand Druid commands him to stop playing the half-wit. What they want from him is the golden horn. Parodi pretends not to understand and keeps playing dumb, but he is repeatedly struck every time he repeats the same story. At a certain point Kellan loses patience and decides to show that stubborn Italian that he has supernatural powers—that he doesn't want the horn because it's precious, but because he intends to use it. Kellan asks for the flute with the two ouroboroi to be handed to him and begins playing the melody of the Druids of the Earth. The two metal reliefs become so charged with energy that flashes of static electricity start to run across his skin. Then, wrapped in a cloud of lightning and sparks, Kellan begins to play the two druidic melodies together in reverse. Suddenly, the building begins to shake and lifts by at least a meter. Beneath the tower, some of the supports of the great chain snap while the others stretch to their maximum tension. When it's all over, amidst widespread fright, Parodi is taken to the window and sees that the tower has indeed risen considerably. People below are staring in surprise at the entrance, now higher than before. Terrified, Parodi confesses the truth: ever since the horn came back into the light, it has always been in his possession. He used it in Crimea

and Sicily to support the cause of Italian unity, of which he is an enthusiastic advocate. Kellan now understands why the tattoo won't work on this man. Parodi has played the horn several times and has absorbed its vibration. That vibration, very likely, if produced repeatedly, has among its many powers the ability to erode the tattoo that makes one a druid—thus making those who play it untattooable. Kellan, more amused than surprised, asks him how he came into possession of the instrument and how he learned the melody. Parodi replies that he is known in many European and American circles as an avid collector of ancient books on natural magic, as well as amulets and other artifacts tied to the esoteric world. Wealthy, with vast means and always traveling the globe, he once attended an auction in Paris where he acquired a Celtic relic—a musical horn made of a strange metal. It had been stolen by a French revolutionary soldier during the Irish uprising and sold to a distracted but rich Parisian collector who tossed it in a drawer and forgot about it. Upon the collector's death, his son squandered the family fortune in gambling, and the father's collection was auctioned off. Parodi, in that moment, purchased some valuable paintings and, on impulse, picked up the horn for a few coins since the auction house had misidentified it as a clumsy replica of older Celtic artifacts. He brought the horn to Italy and displayed it as a mere ornament in his villa in Genoa. Then, years later, he came across a manuscript written in Latin—actually a summary of a more ancient text—which he discovered had once been held in a monastery in Cork, the same place the metal horn had reportedly disappeared from. The manuscript told the legendary story of the horn's forging, and its author—likely a learned medieval European pilgrim who visited the monastery—had even recorded, in Gregorian musical notation, the melody

meant to be played on the horn and the effects it would produce. Parodi, having studied with the Barnabites, knows Latin, can read music, and play wind instruments. He learned the melody, tested its effects on his horses—who immediately benefited from its mysterious power—and thus, when the need arose, he used the horn to defend the interests of the Piedmontese. The Grand Druid reveals to him that he is Kellan, Cathbad's dolphin—the one who, according to the manuscript's legend, is the orca imprisoned in Santorini. But he escaped nearly a century ago, and now, with the horn, he is determined to rewrite the ending of the story by wiping out the entire lineage of Allan and his followers. Enough talk, though. Parodi must tell him where the horn is, or Kellan will use his powers to destroy every building the Parodi Company owns across the globe, while his men attack and sink every one of its ships until none are left. Parodi smiles and replies that he no longer has the horn. Now that Italy is nearly unified, he no longer needs it. So he chose to return it to its place of origin: the monastery. At the moment, the horn is at Topkapi Palace. The Sultan will act as intermediary for the restitution, and Abbot McAllan—already informed—is en route to Constantinople. Kellan bursts into a rage and feels the urge to kill the man on the spot but quickly regains his composure. He orders Parodi to be taken to the tower's cell. Then, together with Marlowe and O'Hara, he contemplates the next move. A few days earlier, they infiltrated a druid into the harem. She is one of Dunya's attendants—a fair-skinned slave gifted by Pasha Buran to the Sultan's last wife, claiming he had captured her during a raid on Christian ships near Nisyros. In truth, the druid came from the orphanage of Saint Conan. As one of the most beautiful adolescents in the institution, she was tattooed at the base of her neck so the

mark would remain hidden under her thick blonde hair. The placement made the tattoo less potent, but it retained its efficacy. Kellan specifically recruited attractive girls to tattoo and plant them where female spies were needed. There's a knock at the door. Russell has just returned from Topkapi, where he met with the Grand Vizier regarding routine governance documents. On his way out, he was intercepted by Clara—or Alara, as she's been renamed in Turkish—their embedded spy inside Topkapi. In a brief moment, to avoid suspicion, she whispered to him that the horn is indeed inside the palace, now stored within the harem. She herself saw the Sultan holding the horn with his guard; it's now in a locked room, under constant watch by the eunuchs who protect the Sultan's wives. It may be the most impenetrable part of Topkapi. Marlowe and O'Hara would prefer to use force. They propose recalling from Nysiros a sizeable group of druid warriors and storming the palace. With their weapons, their almost stone-like invulnerability, and their powers, recovering the horn would have been child's play. But the Grand Druid reins in their enthusiasm. This business about the harem might be a Vikind trap, just like the one in Argentina. They lure them there with the excuse that the horn is inside, and then the Vikindians come out and try to eliminate them. Once their cover is blown and the druidic network and its branches are exposed, even if the Vikindians fail to defeat them in that moment, they would easily wipe them all out over time. It is a risk that cannot be taken. And the only one who can enter the palace and leave again without being discovered is him alone, the Grand Druid. Kellan goes to the window and calls out loudly for Frog. Frog bursts into the room out of breath just as the Grand Druid orders Marlowe to go to the tailor Demir Mustafa, the one who makes clothes for the wealthiest Ottomans who frequent the court. Kellan

takes a pouch of gold coins from a desk drawer. Marlowe must ask the tailor to quickly prepare a black burka for him and a white maiden's burka for Frog. He wants them ready in no more than two hours. The contents of the pouch should be enough to convince the craftsman to get to work immediately. Frog is confused, and Kellan, noticing the boy's expression, informs him that the two of them will infiltrate the harem. Marlowe rushes off at once and returns an hour and a half later with two beautiful garments embellished with golden embroidery. Kellan tries on his and has Frog put on the other. Then he orders everyone to conduct a test in the street. He and Frog, dressed as women, will walk through the market to see whether the disguise is convincing. Marlowe and O'Hara, along with another group of druids, will follow them at a distance and intervene if necessary.

Set 11

Joe and Frances, still dressed in the Ottoman-style clothes given to them at the palace, watch from the garden of Mark's villa the constant coming and going of ships and merchant convoys crossing the Bosphorus. They are worried about Frog and long to know whether he is alive and well. Suddenly, a ship belonging to Ottoman Co. passes before their eyes, heading straight toward the Galata dock. Frances sighs, saying that the ship is probably carrying a load destined for the druids in the tower. Inside it there is also the food for Frog. A sudden idea strikes Joe. He looks into Frances's eyes and, without needing to exchange a single word, they run to Galata to try to slip into the tower unnoticed and gather some information. For them, simply seeing Frog

would be enough to understand how he is doing. They put their Ottoman-style clothes back on and leave through a secondary door at the back of the villa's garden to throw off any spies of the Grand Druid. But as they head toward the ferry, they fail to notice that someone is watching them nonetheless. When they reach the area around the building, they are forced to notice, to their great disappointment, that the tower is surrounded by a high fortified perimeter wall which, at least from the outside, appears to be an insurmountable barrier. As they approach the entrance, they hear the large gate opening and hide in a side alley to watch without being seen. Two women in burkas come out, perhaps mother and daughter, followed by a small detachment of druids. Frances points out to Joe that among the escorting men are Marlowe and O'Hara. Once the procession has moved away and the gate is closed again, Joe and Frances continue their inspection of the compound's perimeter. At a certain point, in the direction of the port, they find the suppliers' entrance. This is where the supplies transported by Ottoman Co. are brought in. But this entrance too is guarded by heavily armed sentinels; however, since it is positioned off to the side relative to the tower, it might be an excellent passage for getting inside. The siren of a steamer echoes through the air. From there they can see a sliver of the Bosphorus, and Joe notices that the ship sounding the siren is the Ottoman Co. freighter, probably signaling to the sentinels at the gate to be ready, since the ship has now docked and the arrival of the supply carts is imminent. Frances suggests waiting for the convoy of wagons from a concealed position and, at the first opportunity, jumping into whichever one suits their purpose. For example, one of the grain carts destined for the horses. They could hide inside the grain and beneath the tarp that usually covers those wagons. Little by

little, they hear the sound of the wagons arriving, groaning over the cobblestones, along with the carters' shouts to their animals as they struggle up the steep slope leading from the dock to the tower, weighed down by their heavy loads. First come wagons full of crates, barrels, and sacks, each one inspected by the guards before being allowed inside. None of those vehicles suits their needs; there is nowhere to hide. But then the wagons carrying straw and feed for the horses arrive. They line up in a queue, yet the carters seem extremely alert to everything happening around them. What they absolutely do not want is for a stowaway or a petty thief to slip into their loads. Suddenly, an accordion begins playing from behind a corner, drawing nearer. From a side street appears a street performer with his trained bear, who starts putting on a little show in front of the carters. The wagon drivers become distracted, climb down, and begin clapping in rhythm as the bear dances faster and faster. The guards at the gate stop their inspections and watch the scene, amused. No one pays attention to the wagons anymore. Joe and Frances understand that this is their moment. But before slipping under the tarp and hiding beneath the straw, Frances quickly grabs a long hijab from a line of laundry hanging out to dry and explains to Joe that it might be useful for him once inside. Passing as a woman would allow him to catch the sentinels off guard if they were discovered. A woman at a window starts shouting at them, but Joe pulls out a gold coin and tosses it straight into her hand. Seeing all that money, the woman quiets down and retreats inside, closing the window behind her. The street performer and the bear are in the middle of their act, and no one has noticed the scene. Now they are ready to hide inside the wagon. When the bear finishes its dance, the street performer asks the carters for a tip while they climb back onto

their wagons. They tell him to go to hell, and in response the man pulls out a firecracker and lights it with a match. Suddenly he throws it onto the second straw wagon in line. The firecracker explodes, sending the horses into a frenzy and setting the straw on fire. Meanwhile, the performer takes off running, and so do the two dwarfs who crawl out from inside the bear's fur and abandon it there. Chaos erupts. The carters struggle to control the horses, and the burning wagon frightens them even more. The guards then suspend their inspections, open the gate, and tell the wagons to enter quickly. Once inside, the horses calm down and the burning wagon is extinguished with buckets of water and sand. Joe and Frances, from underneath, cannot understand what has happened. They hear the bang, the shouting, the horses' neighing, the jolts, then the sudden acceleration and the different sound the wagon makes as it moves from cobblestones to packed earth. They estimate they are already inside. Then the commotion subsides, and they calmly hear the wagon resume its path and, shortly after, come to a stop. They hear the driver climb down, perhaps to ask permission to unload, and his footsteps fade into some kind of interior space. It is time to look outside. Joe and Frances stick their heads out from under the straw covering and, strangely, no one seems to be around. Frances guesses that many druids must have gone off with those two women, leaving the tower with only a few armed guards. Joe veils himself with the hijab, leaving only his eyes uncovered. In the meantime, he takes the carter's whip from the wagon and hides it inside his clothing. To his dismay, Joe discovers that the veil is a winter one, made of wool. So underneath it he begins to sweat profusely. Acting as if nothing were wrong, they head toward the tower, trying to look natural. Suddenly, from behind a building, two armed

druids appear. Frances knows them, but she also knows that her power works on them. In fact, they do not recognize her. This will allow them to buy time. The two druids, noticing the presence of two suspicious women, hurry toward them with their obsidian swords drawn. The druids handle the two figures in women's clothing roughly and demand to know who they are and how they got in. Frances has an intuition. Thanks to spending time with Brooke, she has learned a few words of Turkish. She decides to present herself as a seer who can read the future. She begins repeating to the two druids the word *gelecek*, which means "future." While repeating the word, she deftly takes one of the druids' hands and pretends to read it. Only a few seconds later, Frances yanks the druid hard, lifts him, flips him over, and slams him to the ground, knocking him unconscious. Joe pulls out the whip and wraps it around the other druid's neck. Then he drags him close and punches him. The druid faints. Joe's hand throbs painfully after the blow, and he says it felt like punching a wall, the druid's face was so hard. Frances laughs and tells him that this is what happens when dealing with men who are half-silicified. Both of them cover their heads and faces with the veils and reach the base of the tower. Before more guards arrive or the two they knocked out recover, they must circle the building to look for any openings or weak points. As they do so, they notice that the base of the tower, for at least a meter, looks as if it has just emerged from the earth. Frances, seeing Joe's astonishment, explains that it is undoubtedly the work of the Grand Druid. With the right tools, Kellan could uproot any building from its foundations or make it sink into the deepest recesses of the earth. However, the reconnaissance proves fruitless. No openings, no windows, no arrow slits can be seen anywhere. There is no way to slip

inside the tower unnoticed. The only way in is through the main entrance. Their mission seems to have been pointless. The tower is solid as rock. Then, as if from nowhere except a hairline crack, a rat squeezes out and scurries away squeaking. Frances approaches the spot where the rat emerged and, pushing aside a few stones, a section of wall begins to give way, opening a gap just large enough for a person to pass through. Inside it is dark, but it is clear that the drop from there to the floor is rather significant. They have no time to enter, because the two unconscious druids regain their senses and begin raising the alarm. Joe and Frances start running, trying to reach the perimeter wall before being captured. But after only a few steps, the Grand Druid's cat appears in front of them. The cat is furious and hisses in their direction. Joe tries to get past it with a "nice kitty," but as soon as his hand gets close, the cat unsheathes its claws and tears his shirt. Joe pulls back, and the cat prepares to leap at them. Joe, however, realizes—thanks to his power—that the cat is actually made of metal. So he pulls off the hijab, and when the cat jumps, Joe uses the veil like a matador's cape in a bullfight. The cat lands right on the cloth and becomes tangled in it. The furious creature thrashes to tear it apart and free itself, but in doing so the fabric becomes electrically charged. When the sparks of static energy become visible, Joe tells Frances to strike the cat with lightning. Frances obeys, and a powerful electric discharge hits the cat, leaving it electrocuted. Meanwhile, the guards—joined by druids armed with rifles who have come out of the tower—have almost reached them. They have no time to check whether the cat is still alive. They sprint, manage to leap over the wall, and reach safety as bullets whistle past them.

Set 12

The Grand Druid and Frog, walking through the market, manage quite well to pass as women. No one recognizes who they really are and, in fact, seeing a figure in sumptuous feminine garments, a precious burka, an attendant at her side, and an escort, the people in the market take the figure for a woman of the highest rank and unquestionable piety; the crowd steps aside at her passage, and the vendors hurry to offer their services. After wandering for a long time, the Grand Druid orders them to return to the Tower. When the procession reenters, Kellan immediately realizes that something has happened. The half-scorched cat comes toward him at once, with glassy patches on its back. Then he sees the burned wagon and the bullet holes in the perimeter wall. He immediately demands a report, and the head of the garrison tells him what occurred. Two intruders, a man and a woman, probably not Turks but dressed in Ottoman fashion, slipped into the compound with unknown intentions. They managed to get past security by hiding in a straw wagon, taking advantage of the confusion caused by an incident in the street. Perhaps they were just two petty thieves; in any case, they were discovered and forced to flee. The Grand Druid asks what happened to the cat. The druid explains that it was struck by lightning out of a clear sky. Kellan cannot restrain himself and slaps him, calling him an idiot for failing to recognize two damned Vikindians. And given the powerful electric discharge the cat received, that woman must certainly have been Frances. They were fools to let them escape. Kellan places his hands upon the druid, and the man explodes in a bubble of plasma. The Grand Druid dismisses the matter quickly and, as he returns

to his chambers while Marlowe and O'Hara swear vengeance, Kellan repeats that there is no time to waste on those two and that, if they want to seize the horn, they must act now. Here is the plan. Through the tattoo, he will trigger a severe skin eruption all over the body of the girl they infiltrated into the harem. Clara, upon seeing herself covered in pustules, will understand that this is the agreed-upon signal. She will pretend to be gravely ill and ask to see her trusted healer. A messenger will be sent to the shop of a seller of medicaments in the souk, a man Kellan previously tattooed to serve as cover in case it became necessary—as it now is—to enter Topkapi. The pharmacist will reply that one of the finest healers in all Anatolia will be sent to the palace as soon as possible. The pharmacist will then close his shop and go to the tower, where a litter will be ready; Kellan, dressed as a healer, will climb onto it, while his attendant, Frog, will follow on foot. Kellan orders everyone out. He takes the flute without the two ouroboroi and climbs to the roof of the tower. Looking out over the Bosphorus, Kellan begins to play a mute melody. No matter how hard he blows into the instrument, nothing can be heard. This is because the music he is playing lies beyond the auditory spectrum of the human ear. At the same time, however, on the other side of the strait, the silent notes reach Clara's ear, and she begins to feel a strange tingling across her body. Within a few hours her skin is covered in sores. The girl understands that the Grand Druid needs to enter the palace. Such an eventuality had been planned even before she entered Dunya's service. She rushes to rummage through her belongings to find the vial of liquid she has orders to ingest when the pustules appear. Clara drinks the contents of the vial and, within minutes, she is seized by excruciating pain, loses all her strength, and is overtaken by a high fever.

The other attendants, noticing the girl's condition, immediately send for the eunuch in charge, and to him Clara, with a faint voice, asks that her healer be summoned. The eunuch, fearing an infectious disease, would prefer to send her to die in the city's lazaretto, but since she is the attendant of the sovereign's newest wife and a gift from Pasha Buran, he prefers not to take risks and at least attempt a medical intervention to save her. The eunuch asks how to contact the woman, and Clara provides all the necessary directions. A mounted messenger departs at once for the souk. An hour later, the litter carrying the healer and her small retinue is at the gate of the harem. The eunuch has given orders to let her in without delay and to bring her as quickly as possible to the sick attendant, who in the meantime has been placed in isolation. No one checks beneath the burkas, and Kellan finds himself inside the palace without much effort. For safety, however, he has brought hypnotic powder and the flute with him. And in extreme cases he was ready to dematerialize and sacrifice Frog to the fury of the sultan's guards. When the Grand Druid and Frog are inside the forbidden apartments, they are immediately taken before the attendant, who is kept in an isolated room. The healer asks to remain alone with the patient. When the door closes, Kellan uncovers himself and takes out a small vial containing an antidote to the substance she previously ingested. Both are herbal potions whose recipe is lost in the ancient history of the Druids of the Earth and which Kellan has always known how to prepare. Clara, now silicified by a quarter, recovers quickly. Kellan asks her in which part of the harem the horn is kept under lock and key, and Clara indicates that it is not far from where they are, but to reach it one must pass through another inner courtyard. Kellan asks whether near the horn's room there is a place

where a woman might withdraw in private, and she answers yes. There is a toilet with mirrors where the girls can touch up their makeup or adjust their clothes. Kellan and Frog put their burkas back on and knock on the door. The eunuch on guard asks how the patient is doing. Kellan, in a deliberately feminine voice, replies that after taking a specially prepared medicine the girl is well and will recover soon. She is already showing signs of improvement and no longer needs her help. But to assist the sick girl, both she and her attendant had to exert themselves greatly and would like to freshen up and straighten their clothes. The eunuch nods and escorts them to the other courtyard. As they enter, they immediately see a reinforced door guarded closely by two armed eunuchs, and on the roof there is an archer on each side, positioned to strike intruders even from above. The eunuch signals to the guards that everything is under control, and Kellan and Frog head toward the toilet. At the door, Kellan whispers to Frog to stay outside and prevent anyone from entering. The door locks only from the outside, so Frog must stand guard well or he will not leave the palace alive. Once inside, Kellan removes the burka again and dematerializes, reappearing in the room where the horn is kept. There are no windows, and no one can see him. He walks toward the golden chest in the center of the room. But when he opens the lid, he immediately realizes something is wrong. What is stored inside is indeed a golden wind instrument, but it is only a trivial pipe. He would like to smash everything, but he cannot risk being discovered. He puts the object back in its place and rematerializes in the restroom. While he is outside standing guard, Frog hears a strange rustling behind him and suddenly finds Khulan in front of him. The girl, laughing, puts a finger to her lips to tell him not to make noise. Then she leans toward his ear and, in her Shakespearean English, tells him that

after so many days spent riding together she recognized Frog by the way he walks. She tells him not to worry. Everything is under control. Dunya understood from the very first moment that this Clara was a spy of the pasha, and that the pasha is not who he claims to be. They will not let Frog fall into the hands of that monster. A knocking is heard from inside the toilet door. Khulan vanishes as quickly as she appeared, and Frog prepares to open the door for his master. A eunuch approaches the two false women and, without saying a word, escorts them back the way they came. Before leaving, the healer asks to see her patient again, and the eunuch allows it. Kellan whispers into Clara's ear that the horn in the harem is a fake. She will therefore have to work to discover where the real one is. Then the two fake women are escorted outside. This time there is no litter waiting for the Grand Druid. They have an appointment with Marlowe and some druids who are waiting for them at the souk, where they can remove those clothes and return to Galata on horseback. Kellan is furious about the situation and paces nervously. In a particularly crowded stretch of street, the Grand Druid bumps into a man who, with an insolent attitude, shouts at him to watch where he's going and slaps the person he believes to be a woman. Blinded by fury, Kellan lands a punch that fractures the man's jaw and sends him flying two meters away, unconscious. The crowd falls silent at once and immediately parts to let that formidable "woman" pass.

Set 13

Joe and Frances, returning from their sortie, find Mark having an aperitif with Brooke on the terrace overlooking the Bosphorus.

Point-blank, they ask the consul whether a certain lawyer named Russell had accompanied the Pasha to Ganja, and Brooke answers yes. They then ask whether the gold crates bore the seal of the Ottoman Bank, and Brooke not only confirms it but adds that the bank's own director was traveling with them — a man named Wayne. Frances confirms that those two names belong to the top management of the druidic organization. So now there is no doubt that Brooke spent almost a month in the company of Kellan. At least now they know what the Grand Druid looks like. They ask Brooke if he can produce an identikit, and he replies that he already thought of that after the meeting with Olaf at the Palace. Brooke goes to the living room to fetch his bag and takes out a portrait he had commissioned from a street artist near Hagia Sophia. Mark reminds them that the following day the race at the hippodrome will take place. He already has the invitations ready, which they will find in their rooms the next morning. Kellan, as the organizer of the event under the guise of a pasha, will certainly be present. That portrait will therefore be useful for recognizing the Grand Druid in case he tries to flee when cornered. The butler calls everyone to dinner, but at that very moment a messenger from the sultan arrives at the villa with a written message from the Grand Vizier. They are all invited, the next day, to Topkapi for the ceremony of returning the golden horn to Abbot McAllan, who has come especially from Ireland. Afterwards, together with the Sultan, they will go to the hippodrome to watch the great race. The ceremony is extremely private and, besides a few highly selected guests, only a handful of diplomats and high imperial dignitaries will be present. The messenger, in addition to the Sultan's written invitation, also has an oral message for Joe and Frances. Olaf will be waiting for them in a few hours at the Hagia Sophia mosque for the evening

prayer. When the muezzin has finished calling the faithful, Olaf will be in the women's gallery on the second floor. He will be wearing a black burka with golden embroidery. At that hour there will not be many people, and they will have to meet near the runic inscription that reads *Allan defeated Cathbad*. It was carved by the first Vikindians who settled at court as the imperial guard. Frances, knowing runes, will be able to recognize it. Joe sighs, knowing he will have to dress as a woman. They go to the mosque at the appointed time. Joe is wearing a full burqa, while Frances has her head covered with a long veil that also conceals her mouth. Frances has no difficulty finding the inscription, and shortly afterward Olaf appears. He is there to inform them that the Grand Druid knows the horn is at Topkapi and has even tried to steal it. The Sultan had foreseen this move and deceived him. Frances asks how Kellan managed to breach the palace's security. Olaf replies that for some time they had suspected the Grand Druid had a spy inside the palace. Now they have identified her. She is an attendant of Princess Dunya, given to her by the pasha himself. Unfortunately, just as they were going to seize her in her room, the woman fled and is now being hunted throughout the city. In any case, the horn is currently in a top-secret location known only to the sovereign. The Sultan has not revealed its whereabouts even to the Grand Vizier. And security at Topkapi has been tripled. Tomorrow morning all Vikindians available in the city will be at the palace to see the horn and defend it from the druids, who would certainly attack if they knew about the ceremony. Joe, Frances, Odette, and Theo must also be ready for a possible confrontation. There will also be non-Vikindian guests, but very few — the Grand Vizier, a few ministers, and a handful of trusted high dignitaries, including some prelates from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Frances interrupts him.

Olaf is saying that outsiders will be present at one of the most important Vikindian ceremonies, with the risk of making their existence public. Olaf understands Frances's concerns. The fact is that the Patriarch of Constantinople insisted that some of his trusted men attend the ceremony as soon as he learned that an important Catholic dignitary would be received by the Sultan to reclaim an ancient relic belonging to his monastery — and likely once belonging to a saint also venerated by the Orthodox Church. These are skirmishes between priests. But there is nothing to worry about. After the event, each of the three clerics will receive a generous dose of *wanige* and will forget everything. Then the power of certain Vikindians will flood them with false memories, so that when they return to the Patriarch they will give him a confused and trivial account of the day, without remembering a single detail of what truly happened. For now, Olaf orders them — as he has ordered the other guests — not to speak of the event to anyone and to present themselves early in the morning at the Garden Gate of Topkapi, because the ceremony will take place in an inner courtyard of that wing of the palace. Meanwhile, a group of veiled women approaches the balustrade and, opening the sacred book, begins to pray. Olaf disappears, and Joe and Frances make room for the women and step outside into the open air. A woman dressed in black had observed the scene from the shadow of a nearby column. The three were whispering, so it was impossible to hear what they were saying — but she didn't need to. At the college in London they had taught her to read lips, because the Grand Druid considers it an essential technique for anyone destined to serve as one of his infiltrators. Clara did not miss a single syllable of what was said. In complete silence and with great discretion, the woman leaves the mosque, passes through the

lax checks of the Janissaries — who have been alerted to the search for the attendant — and heads straight to the Galata Tower. The Grand Druid, after hearing the woman's report, orders her to settle into one of the tower's rooms. She will be useful the next day, when he and his best Druids attack the palace and finally take possession of the golden horn. They will at last rid themselves of those damned Vikindians, eliminate the Sultan, and Kellan will present himself at the hippodrome as the new lord and master of the Ottoman Empire. The Grand Druid summons his entire entourage to review the details of the plan and begin the meticulous preparations so that the following day will be, for them, an unforgettable day of revenge and triumph.

Set 14

Frog, wandering around the perimeter of the tower, notices the agitation inside the building and throughout the entire compound. Something big is being prepared, and soon he will be called to take part in it. And indeed, the Grand Druid summons him shortly afterward and orders him to go speak with Parodi and squeeze as much information out of the prisoner as he can. Every detail could prove crucial in this business of the horn, and Kellan wants to minimize the chances of failure. He instructs Frog to gain Parodi's confidence, emphasizing that Frog is also a prisoner and therefore Parodi might trust him and reveal some decisive information. But first Frog must cover his tattoo by wearing a long-sleeved shirt. Parodi knows that mark is druidic, and if he saw it, he would never trust the boy. Frog, wearing a shirt far too large for him and with sleeves that are too long, enters Parodi's cell and introduces himself in his English which,

he must admit, has improved a lot in these months. Parodi, without batting an eye, replies in Cherokee. He explains that this language is unknown to both Kellan and the druids, so even if they overhear them talking, they will not understand what they are saying. Parodi knows who Frog is, why he is there, and he also knows that the tattoo does not work on him. The proof is that the tattoo does not pulse even in the presence of the Grand Druid. One can tell even with the shirt on. The tattoos of all the others, when Kellan is nearby, are noticeable even under clothing if one has a trained eye. Frog replies that he knows why the tattoo — which the Grand Druid surely tried to imprint on him — did not take. Having touched and played the horn for a long time, he has become immune to the Grand Druid's power. Still surprised by the man, Frog asks him how he can speak an Indian language and know the story of the Grand Druid if he is neither Indian nor Vikindian. Parodi replies that he is the husband of Eileen McAllan, sister of that Birgid — Joe's cousin — whom they met in Ireland. His wife was killed by the Grand Druid during the clash in Buenos Aires. A few years after her death, when Anita was also killed, Johanna went to his home in Italy and entrusted him with a tremendous secret: the horn had never truly disappeared, and in recent years she had always kept it with her. Since 1761, after the events in Santorini, the tribal chiefs had decided that with Kellan still at large, the horn was not safe in the monastery, and they kept it hidden, constantly moving it between America and Europe. But after Argentina, Johanna was more determined than ever to settle accounts with Kellan once and for all. Until then, it had been nearly impossible to flush him out of his hiding place, but as the events in Buenos Aires had shown, the horn was what Kellan sought most greedily — and therefore it was with the horn

that they would lure him out and recapture him. On the other hand, Parodi adds, one cannot really blame Kellan: he truly *could* easily defeat the Vikindians if the horn were ever to fall into his hands. Johanna wanted persistent rumors to begin circulating that the horn had resurfaced, in order to lure Kellan out of his shell and trap him. Knowing that Parodi understood music and that his shipping company had docks all over the world, Johanna entrusted the horn to him. She gave him the sheet music with the notes of the melody, and he learned to play it by heart, perfectly. The horn remained in his home in Genoa for about ten years, but whenever Johanna needed it, she would come, take it, and bring it back. She did the same in the Andes to remedy the puma die-off that was worrying Anita. In the meantime, to practice, Parodi traveled around the Kingdom of Sardinia playing the instrument, making northern Italy extraordinarily prosperous in agriculture — so much so that Piedmont became economically capable of unifying Italy. Which, in the end, had been Anita's dream, as well as his own. During his musical performances, Parodi had been extremely careful not to arouse suspicion and had always focused only on rural areas where the presence of possible druids was practically nonexistent. Then, a few years ago, Johanna authorized the use of the instrument even in the presence of potential druids, so that word would reach the Grand Druid. She had learned that druids had infiltrated Ottoman battalions during the Crimean War and that Parodi would be there with the Piedmontese. Therefore, when necessary, Parodi did not hesitate to use the instrument at full power. This year Parodi was involved in Garibaldi's expedition, and upon hearing of the many wounded soldiers, he publicly used the horn a second time. Incidentally, the story of the general's injury was fake news, and his presence in the hospital was a staged

performance. Garibaldi had never been hit, but seeing the many wounded overflowing the hospital after the first real battle of the campaign, he had asked Mario for the intervention of the horn so as not to compromise the later phases of the war with so many soldiers already out of action. Mario then contacted him. Moreover, Garibaldi's campaign was being followed by a multitude of journalists and foreign correspondents. Thus the rumor of the mysterious melody spread around the world and, punctually, Kellan answered the call, unafraid of losing his cover, so certain was he that he was close to recovering the instrument. Frog has a sudden realization. Parodi can't possibly be saying that the shaman Johanna, Joe's aunt, sent them on the search for the missing horn — which, however, was not missing at all but merely hidden by her — in order to lure Kellan to Constantinople and force him into the open? Exactly so, Parodi replies. The Vikindians made sure everyone believed that in Constantinople *he* had the horn, so that he would be kidnapped by the druids. It wasn't an accident or one of Kellan's clever tricks. It had all been prepared in detail. Even without certainty, Johanna had long suspected that Kellan was hiding in the Galata Tower. Therefore she wanted Parodi to be inside the building when the time came for him to fulfill his task. From the commotion he hears outside the cell, it is clear that the moment is almost at hand. Frog wants to know what task that is, but Parodi has no time to answer. The Grand Druid's shout, calling him to his presence, brings Frog back to the reality of his condition. The druid acting as jailer orders the boy to go immediately to the chief, who has been told that the prisoner spoke — even if in a language unknown to them and to him. The Grand Druid knows that Frog, thanks to the tattoo, cannot lie to him and will tell him everything the prisoner "sang." The boy

explains that with Parodi — whose mother was from Malta — he could only speak Maltese, because the man does not speak English and he does not speak Italian. Joe is a Knight of Malta and taught him the basics of that language in Santorini. Frog reports that the man is just a spoiled, wealthy fool who knows nothing about Vikindians or Druids. He happened to find the horn in his hands and discovered its power by chance while playing it. The man was looking for some magical solution to the red numbers of his company, which seems to be suffering heavy losses. But instead of producing money, the horn is only good for healing the sick. That is why he returned it. He hopes for some kind of endorsement from the abbot with the British governorship of Ireland, in order to win some public contract that might give his failing business a bit of oxygen. And that is the only thing occupying his thoughts. Parodi is useless for the success of their mission.

11

Chapter 12 - Topkapi

Set 1

Early in the morning, an armed escort presents itself at the Patriarchate of Constantinople, claiming to have been sent by the Sultan to collect his three guests. In fact, they are blond, tall, and light-eyed, so they truly look like the Vikindians of the royal guard. The young priest at the reception replies that he knows nothing about this and that it had been arranged for the three clerics to reach Topkapi on foot. The three prelates, already dressed for the ceremony, arrive and ask what is happening. The leader of the detachment explains that the Sultan, after the disappearance of Sir Parodi, is determined to safeguard the safety of all his guests as much as possible while waiting to lay hands on whoever is making the city unsafe. Outside, litters are waiting for them. They will take them to their destination. It is not safe to walk. The three priests climb into the litters, which disappear along the road to Topkapi. Inside, a small incense

brazier fills the litter with a perfumed, sanctified scent. It is obviously not incense that is burning, but the Grand Druid's narcotic powder mixed with fragrant essences so as not to arouse suspicion. Because of the powder's properties, the prelates fall asleep almost immediately, and as the litters wind through alleys and streets, they are swapped with identical ones, while the litters containing the three prelates are taken to the Galata Tower. Little by little, the Druids dressed as the Sultan's guards slip away, replaced by Druids wearing a sort of uniform bearing the emblem of the Patriarchate.

Set 2

Mark, Joe, Frances, Teo, and Odette arrive at the palace wearing extremely elegant European clothes. They are admitted through a door that opens onto a garden full of plants and flowers, with various animals moving freely about: peacocks, deer, and a one-year-old baby elephant grazing on the grass. From there they are led through a rather large doorway that gives access to an inner courtyard prepared for the ceremony. The courtyard is square and has two floors. One side is occupied by the staircase leading to the ground floor, while the perimeter of the courtyard, both above and below, consists of a covered perimetral loggia. In the loggia on the first floor are the women of the Sultan's harem, watching. Abbot McAllan stands at the center of the courtyard, surrounded by some of his monks, and gestures for Joe to come closer. All around are the other guests who, standing, wait for the ceremony to begin, chatting in small groups. Joe cannot believe his eyes. Among other Vikindians he does not know, there are his father, his mother, and his brother. He would like

to rush to them and ask them a thousand questions, but he is greeted by Auwory, who is with Bless and speaking with Brooke. Next to them is Princess Louise Juliane, joking with Demidoff, Poniatowsky, and Bonaparte. Jessie Mario is there, accompanied by Manfreda and both her children, chatting with Adonia. With them, protected by his poncho-armor, is also Giuseppe Garibaldi. A little farther away is cousin Richard, speaking intensely with the three professors: Merk, Punicson, and Florakis. Joe does not know whom to start questioning, but there is no more time. A chamberlain claps his hands loudly to call for silence. The Sultan is about to enter.

The Sultan makes his entrance on a throne carried on the shoulders of his bodyguards. Dunya follows him on foot with her attendants. After the throne is set down, Dunya bows to her future husband and goes upstairs to join the other women. The guests stand before the Sultan. The courtyard is festively decorated with flowers, flags, and plants. The Sultan greets those present and orders Olaf to take the casket. The head of the guard approaches the throne, prostrates himself, and extracts from a secret drawer carved beneath the seat a precious, decorated box. He hands it to the Sultan, who opens it and is struck by a beam of golden light. A murmur of wonder runs through the crowd. The Sultan then calls the abbot to him and hands him the casket. The abbot, moved, shows the contents of the casket to those present: the light of the horn illuminates everyone.

Set 3

Meanwhile, Kellan has already left the Galata Tower, heading toward Topkapi. He is dressed in the ceremonial attire of the empire's pashas, and he has his druids dressed as Janissaries so they can approach the palace without arousing suspicion. When the procession reaches the palace gates, Kellan presents his credentials to the guards, but they reply that they have orders to keep the palace sealed until further notice. No one enters and no one leaves until the Sultan himself gives the word. Kellan then draws the flute with the two ouroboroi and begins to play, throwing the guard detachment into dissonance; under his power, they open the gate for him. Once inside the garden, the Sultan's Janissaries draw their weapons and order the pasha and his escort to turn back or be killed on the spot. Kellan keeps playing while his men throw the hypnotic powder into the air. In an instant, the Janissaries become zombies under his command. The Grand Druid orders them to break down the gate leading to the ceremonial courtyard. While the abbot is giving his speech of thanks to the Sultan for having recovered the horn and for returning it to him, a great crash is heard coming from the entrance door. Everyone turns and sees the door torn off its hinges and, on the staircase, the Grand Druid and his men, armed to the teeth. All those present draw their sickles, and the Sultan's guards move into a defensive stance, while the Sultan remains on his throne, impassive.

Set 4

In the confusion of the first moments, no one pays attention to the three prelates who, as representatives of the Patriarch, are only a few steps from the Sultan. Lightning-fast, as soon as they see the Grand Druid, they spring into action. One grabs the Sultan by the throat and presses an obsidian dagger to him. At that point, one of the other two false prelates pins the abbot against the wall, while the last one disarms Olaf and the guards by threatening to kill the sovereign. A group of druids goes up to the first floor and holds the women prisoner. Clara, who has come in Kellan's retinue, takes care of barring from the inside all access points to the courtyard. Surrounded by druids with obsidian daggers ready to strike, the Vikindians find themselves blocked in the center of the courtyard with their sickles drawn — except for Poniatowski, who has his usual diamond sword. Frances points out to Joe that, even if surrounded and protected by the others, the two of them are the only ones unarmed. Joe looks toward his mother, thinking she is defenseless, and instead is greatly surprised when he sees her holding a sickle. Even she has developed a power, and he had never noticed. Just as he had never noticed his father's and brother's powers. They too have drawn their sickles. But more urgent thoughts crowd his mind. The Vikindians would like to hurl themselves at the attackers, but their hands are tied. Any rash move would lead to the Sultan's death. There must be a way out, he thinks — but what?

Set 5

The Grand Druid has now descended into the courtyard. Kellan, master of the scene, gestures for his men to move closer to the Vikindians and, in English, orders Frances to step forward. She wants to resist, and Joe holds her hand, urging her not to go. Meanwhile, the druids are insistently signaling to her that she has no choice. She quietly steps out from the group. The Grand Druid makes an ouroboros whistle through the air, cutting the bracelet that covers her tattoo. To his great displeasure, Kellan discovers that what Frog told him was not true. Frances still has the tattoo. That Indian bastard deceived him, and perhaps the tattoo does not work on him either, but he has always pretended otherwise. But there is no time now to dwell on past mistakes — he will deal with Frog later and make sure he meets the end he deserves. Frances's forearm begins to pulse. Joe, who is close to Adonia, whispers to her that he fears what Kellan will do to the girl. But Adonia reassures him. Frances has passed through the melody of the Aspronisi cave, which has almost nullified the tattoo's potential. That is probably what happened to Frog as well, if Kellan tried to tattoo him. So if Frances is standing there, it means she is pretending. Kellan announces that Frances is the one who can play the horn better than anyone else in the world. He is the one who raised and trained her precisely for this day. He looks around, satisfied, and declares to all that the history of the world is about to change. As soon as Frances begins to play the horn backwards, the Vikindians will lose their power, and he, together with his druids, will turn them into mincemeat. Then he will proceed to free the arch-druid Cathbad and their other companions of old. For Indians and

Vikindians it will be the end, while the planet will be ravaged by destructive volcanic eruptions. On the ruins of this world, contaminated by Allan's toxic magic, a new druidic civilization will be born. Satisfied with his words and with the looks of hatred and resentment from the Vikindians, Kellan makes a theatrical gesture and asks for the horn to be brought to him. Kellan opens the box, takes it in his hand with an air of triumph, and offers it to Frances. The girl begins to play; the melody is beautiful, but nothing happens. Poniatowsky bursts into laughter. The Grand Druid orders Frances to play better or it will be worse for her. Frances counters that this is the best she can do with a fake horn. Kellan snatches the instrument from her hands and examines it carefully. It is made of fine solid gold and shines brilliantly. Kellan does not understand. Suddenly, the horn stops shining in his hands. Even more confused, Kellan lifts his eyes to the sky and sees Khulan holding a large mirror. From one of the palace windows, the girl had directed sunlight onto the object to make it gleam like the original. Kellan becomes furious. He slams the fake instrument violently to the ground and orders his druids to prepare to kill everyone as soon as he gives the signal. Kellan regains his composure, draws an obsidian sword, and is ready to begin the slaughter. But from above, something hits him on the head. He touches it and realizes that the "something" is bird droppings. A voice familiar to Joe, from offstage, from above, with a strong Appalachian cadence, warns Kellan: "If I were you, I wouldn't do that." A satisfied laugh follows. Everyone lifts their eyes to the sky. Sitting on the edge of the roof is Aunt Joanna. She is the one who spoke.

Set 6

The Galata Tower has been left deserted. Kellan wanted almost all the druids with him at Topkapi, while Marlowe, O'Hara, Russell, and the remaining druids are at the hippodrome. Frog is free to wander around the tower on his own, but the structure has its main door barred from the outside and locked. Frog tries to open other doors, but those too are locked. Strangely, the door to the cell area is open. Perhaps it is to let more air circulate, since when they left, they locked the tower with Frog inside — who, for them, is no threat but a faithful little dog. Frog enters to speak with Parodi, but immediately understands why the room needed airing out. In the cell next to Parodi's, three men dressed as priests lie half-asleep on makeshift bedding. Parodi asks Frog to let him out, but he replies that he cannot: the keys to the complex were taken away, and they were all left locked inside. Parodi asks where everyone is. From what Frog has understood, the Grand Druid, dressed as a pasha, has gone to the palace to take care of some business. Others have gone to the hippodrome, taking with them the mare that, ever since they returned from Ganja, they have kept in the stable, preventing him from even seeing her. "All as expected," Parodi replies, "because today is the great day of the trap Johanna devised for Kellan. But for Johanna to imprison him again, she needs someone in the tower to trigger the chain. It will be the two of us who activate the mechanism." Ever since Brooke returned from Ganja, the Vikindians have always known Frog was in the tower. But he was left there a few extra days precisely so he could help Parodi with the chain. Frog does not understand. Parodi tells him there is no time to explain and that they must think of a way

to get him out of the cell. Frog suggests breaking the lock with a hammer, but Parodi points out that the lock is very sturdy and will not give way. At that point Frog has an idea. Parodi knows how to play the horn's melody. What if he tried playing it with Kellan's old flute? It might be able to open the locks. Time is running out, and Parodi has few alternatives. Frog goes to the window with the damaged iron grate and breaks off one of the bars, using it as a crowbar to force open the door to the Grand Druid's room. After several failed attempts, he manages to break the door and enter. Frog goes straight to the cabinet where the flutes are kept. He finds both the old flute and the two-piece flute without the ouroboroi He decides to take the old flute — if it didn't work, he could always come back for the other. Then he races down the stairs and brings it to Parodi. Parodi asks Frog to close the door to the cell area so that the music remains confined to that space in case uncontrolled effects occur. They cannot know what might happen when playing that melody with that flute. Parodi takes the instrument and begins to play. At first, nothing seems to happen, although the flute — which had looked shiny and new — now, with each note, becomes older and more decrepit. Then he notices the same thing happening to the metals in the room, until the cell locks break after becoming half-rusted. Immediately afterward, the flute crumbles into a thousand pieces. Now that Parodi is out, the two of them must run to the chain room to trigger it. Frog points out to Parodi that the activation mechanism is at the bottom of the stairs, but the control room is behind a very heavy iron door for which only the Grand Druid and a few others have the key. They run downstairs anyway and confirm that the door is barred and impossible to break down or pick. Frog remembers that there is a little window that opens onto the Bosphorus, but it is probably

unreachable now after Kellan raised the tower. And in any case, getting outside is impossible because the tower's main door is locked. Parodi sees no alternatives. The only solution is to break down the door that opens to the outside. Parodi looks around. He notices that along the wall of the staircase, on the first floor, several barrels are lined up. Parodi has an idea and tells Frog to follow him to see what those barrels contain. They try to move one, but it is extremely heavy. They open the lid and see that it is full of gold nuggets. "Perfect," Parodi says: his idea was to use a barrel as a battering ram, and the fact that this one is so heavy makes it ideal for the job. With some effort, they lay the barrel on its side and roll it to the stairs. Then they push it down. The barrel descends, gains speed, and with a crash breaks through the entrance door. The two rush outside and try to find a way to get into the chain room. Circling the tower, they find the hole opened by Frances and, looking inside, realize that it opens directly onto the chain room. The floor is almost three meters below them, but they have no rope available, and finding one would take too long. The jump is high, but Frog says he can do it. He prepares himself mentally, then leaps and lands like an athlete. Frog sees a spare key hanging on the wall. He opens the door from the inside and tells Parodi to go around.

Set 7

Parodi arrives immediately, and together they try to understand how to set the machine in motion. The largest lever is certainly the one that activates the mechanism, while the smaller levers are used for retrieval operations and for putting the system on standby. Parodi tries to push the large lever, but it proves ex-

tremely hard. Frog joins in, but even their combined efforts are useless. Parodi then tells Frog to go fetch the three prelates. Six extra arms might help. After a while he comes back downstairs with the clerics, who are still groggy. Parodi explains to them in Turkish what they must do, and they begin to push. But just as they are concentrating their efforts, the silicon cat appears in the doorway with hostile intentions. It is furious. With a leap, Frog moves away from the lever and tells the group to keep pushing while he keeps the cat occupied. Parodi tells him to forget about the cat, but Frog replies that that cat is not a real cat — it has been assilicated by the Grand Druid. It is a murderous fury toward anyone who tries to harm its master. And since it is made of metal, it is practically indestructible. Frog starts running and jumping to make the cat chase him, while Parodi and the prelates keep pushing. With great effort and repeated attempts, the lever begins to move. Once it reaches the end of its course, a complicated hydraulic system activates and begins to raise the chain. But the cat is still in the room, trying again and again to attack Frog, who is starting to get tired. At that point Parodi has an idea to get rid of that infernal beast. He takes a mallet from the emergency toolbox and asks Frog to keep the cat busy. Parodi opens the hatch, climbs down to the level of the chain, and begins striking it vigorously with the hammer. After a rather intense series of blows, Parodi tells Frog to come down and bring the cat close to the chain. With a jump, Frog drops into the hatch and lands wedged between the chain and the wall. Parodi joins him. They are trapped. The cat, in fact, looks at them smugly from above, then descends the steps with sadistic slowness, believing he has the two saboteurs in his grasp. It approaches the chain, unsheathes its deadly claws, and measures the distance for the leap — but an irresistible force

pulls it toward the winch and the rolling chain. The cat struggles and tries to resist with all its strength, but the pull is so strong that it is sucked between the chain and the winch and crushed by the iron links. The friction and heat pulverize the cat into a cloud of magnesium. Frog asks Parodi how he did it. And Parodi explains that the chain is oriented north–south, and by striking it with the hammer — iron on iron — he managed to magnetize it, turning it into a giant magnet. The effect is short-lived, but it was enough to get rid of the cat. They climb back up, and through the control window, though off-axis, they see that the chain is already halfway up and will soon be in position. But Frog does not celebrate, because he hears the dolphins' cry for help in the Bosphorus and, looking more closely at the chain, sees that almost at the center a dolphin calf has become trapped, caught by a piece of an old fishing net. Frog does not hesitate for a moment and tells Parodi he is going to save the calf. Parodi tries to convince him that it is madness to walk thirty meters above the ground, and besides, the calf is entangled in a net and he has nothing to cut it with. Frog pulls out an ouroboros he found in Kellan's room and says he will use that. He shakes it, and the blades spring out. Parodi has no time to say anything else — Frog has already opened the hatch and gone down. Parodi and the priests watch him through the small window as he runs toward the calf along the chain, now fully taut.

Set 8

Johanna, dressed in Cherokee clothing, stands on the edge of the roof and unsheathes her sickle. Her scar is clearly visible. Frances, who does not know Johanna personally, recognizes

in that shaman the fourth woman present at the funeral and notices on the sickle the symbol of her grandmother. From there, with a leap, Johanna lands right in front of the Grand Druid, who says he is not at all surprised by such a childish trick to lure him into the open. This way it will be even easier for him to recover the horn and destroy the Vikindians in one blow. Is he mistaken, or are almost all the tribal chiefs present in that courtyard? Wiping them out will be child's play. But now Johanna must hand him the real horn, or her nephew's life will be at stake. One of the druids cocks a sniper rifle and points it directly at Joe's face. Kellan adds that sickles may stop the ouroboroi, but not a bullet. Aunt Johanna bursts out laughing and looks toward Caroline, who nods. Suddenly the wooden part of the rifle begins to sprout leaves and shoots, which grow rapidly, forcing apart the pieces of the weapon and rendering it useless. The startled druid draws his obsidian dagger and points it menacingly at the Vikindians. But now he is afraid. Aunt Johanna pulls the real horn from a leather bag slung over her shoulder. The instrument shines with an unnaturally brilliant light, and Kellan, faced with such radiance, is forced to half-close his eyes. Johanna waves the instrument under his nose, asking ironically whether this is what he has been looking for. For the record, the horn was never lost and never stolen. After Kellan's escape from Santorini, the horn had been hidden to keep it away from possible leaks in favor of the druids. For the last thirty years, Johanna has been the one guarding it, without revealing even to the other tribal chiefs where she kept it. Sending her nephew in search of the instrument served as bait to draw Kellan and his organization into the open. Torn between fury and the desire for revenge, the Grand Druid tries to snatch the horn from Johanna's hands, but she immediately throws it to Joe,

who catches it in mid-air. The druids turn their attention to him, and he, unarmed, like a rugby player, charges forward head-down toward them, trying to weave between opponents and reach Olaf and his men. The other Vikindians cover his escape, attacking the druids, who respond by unleashing a hell of flying ouroboroi. The Sultan, meanwhile, without anyone expecting it, splits in two. He suddenly appears behind those who, just a moment earlier, were holding him prisoner and pulverizes them with a blow of his sickle. Then he becomes one again. Father Brendon, immobilized as well, with a quick maneuver pulls the obsidian sword from the druid threatening him and shatters him. Joe, seeing the scene and marveling at the fact that the Sultan is also a Vikindian, ends up getting distracted. He has gotten too close to the Grand Druid, and with a kick, the latter sends him flying to the ground. Then he is on him. Joe, strangely, is not afraid of him — on the contrary, he looks at him intensely. So intensely that little by little the Grand Druid loses that outer veil that made him appear human and reveals himself for what he is: a golem of silicon and metal. The Grand Druid is surprised and looks at his own body without understanding. But there is no time for aesthetics now, and Kellan lands a punch on Joe, who shields the horn with his body. Kellan keeps hitting hard. Joe cannot withstand for long the Herculean strength of that metal golem, but a providential whistle in the air saves him, distracting Kellan for an instant. It is Joe's father's sickle, whistling straight toward the chest of the attacker. Kellan dematerializes and reappears elsewhere. Joe gets back up and notices that, as he looks at a druid, that druid loses his human appearance and reveals a metallic, gunmetal-colored face and body. Once they are all unmasked, it becomes even easier to recognize them in the chaos. Johanna, satisfied, understands

that her nephew has truly activated his power. Now she can deal with Kellan. Kellan, seeing Johanna coming toward him, quickly grabs his flute to stun the Vikindians, take the horn from them, and then finish them off one by one. He is about to bring it to his lips when Bonaparte shouts, "Demidoff, now." The count turns toward Kellan and turns his flute into cloth. Then he turns toward the druid he is dueling with and likewise turns his obsidian dagger into cloth. The druid has no time to flee and disappears in a flash of magnesium after a blow from a sickle. The Grand Druid throws the cloth flute aside and tells Johanna that the instrument was not essential to kill them all and to slit her throat with her own sickle. Kellan opens his frock coat and shows that he has the sickle tucked into his sash. "Remember when I took it from you?" he says with sardonic scorn, then tells her to look around: the druids are superior in number and will soon overpower them. Every Vikindian has a power, but each use exhausts them. He and his druids, on the other hand, feel no fatigue. They should accept it. They are doomed. "Do you really think you've won?" Johanna replies, inviting him to look up. Dunya and her attendants have taken daggers and ouroboroi from the druids on the upper floor and have overpowered them. Dunya looks toward Kellan as, with her sickle, she pierces Clara, who disintegrates in a flash of magnesium. The girls come down and, together with the Sultan, help Olaf and the guards eliminate the few druids still defending the entrances. Olaf opens one of the barred doors and lets the rest of his men in. The Vikindians launch their attack. While the Grand Druid hesitates for a moment, caught off guard by the sudden reversal of the situation, Frances picks up Joe's father's sickle and heads toward Kellan. With tears in her eyes, she hurls herself at him in fury and cuts his arm, from which

hydrogen of an electric blue color spurts out. He shoves her away, sending her flying, adding that he will deal with her afterward and slit her throat just as he did with her grandmother. But first he has an old score to settle with Johanna, who is nearby. She says she is ready. Besides, she still has to retrieve her sickle. Kellan summons a whirl of water that envelops Aunt Johanna in an attempt to drown her. But the little elephant from the Sultan's zoological garden, at full speed, breaks through the entrance of the courtyard and, with its 600 kilos, runs forward with its trunk to suck up the water. Once it has taken in a good load, it sprays it all back into the druid's face. Then it begins charging the few druids still standing. A gust of wind dries Kellan, and a mini-tornado forms around the aunt. Caroline, watching the scene, channels her power toward Johanna, and Johanna instantly makes plants of squirting cucumber sprout, with giant fruits that burst immediately, covering Kellan in a cloud of pulp and seeds. Those fruits are so acidic that they prove irritating even to Kellan's silicon hide. The wind stops. At this point the aunt looks toward Mario, and she, instantly understanding Johanna's intentions, opens a breach in the building on the garden side of the palace. Joe, meanwhile, holding the horn tightly, goes to help Frances, who is still stunned from the blow, but she reassures him that she is fine. One of the few druids left, from behind them, tries to stab Joe in the back with a dagger, but Teo steps in and, rock-solid, blocks the blow and reduces the attacker to dust with his sickle. All three together, watched from behind by Odette, reach the staircase and the path toward the garden. Kellan, from the breach, sees that Joe, with the horn, has taken refuge in the garden. He therefore abandons the duel with Johanna, dematerializes, and reappears outside. The aunt shouts to Joe

to pass the horn to Frances. And while she hurls herself toward Kellan to slow his escape, she yells to Frances to be ready to play it as soon as she gives the word. The Grand Druid sees that Frances already has the horn at her lips and is ready to play. His followers have been pulverized one after another, and not one remains standing, while a crowd of Vikindians is closing in on him. He is alone. Kellan, watching the Vikindians advance, considers what to do. This match is now lost, so he must find a way to reach the Ottoman Co. emergency steamer that is ready to depart from Galata. He will return to Nysiros, where he will reorganize. He will come back with more weapons and more men, and then no one will be able to stop him. But then he looks toward the sea and sees the chain stretched tight. His escape route is now compromised. From Constantinople, one can no longer flee by sea. The Bosphorus is sealed. A thunderous boom draws his attention. On the other side of the Golden Horn is a gunboat flying the flag of the Knights of Malta, which has just sunk the Ottoman Co. steamer that Kellan would have used to escape. On the deck stand Monsignor Rory McAllan and Grand Master Otto von Eckstein. A signalman, communicating with flags, announces that the ship comes from Nysiros, where the druids' base has been annihilated. It is Punicson who translates the message, making sure Kellan can hear it as well. But the Grand Druid does not flinch and still searches for a way out. He will start again by joining the orcas, even though none are in sight and he does not have the flute to summon them. He cannot throw himself into the sea. He cannot swim, and even if he could, his siliceous body would drag him straight to the bottom. The situation appears desperate — but something catches his attention. That dimwit Frog is halfway along the chain with a dolphin calf tucked under his arm. Kellan, seeing him, believes

he still has a way out. The boy has the power to ride dolphins. If he managed to reach the other side with the boy, he would force him to call his little friends, who would carry them out to open sea. At that point the orcas would appear and, after devouring those filthy animals and the little Indian, they would rescue him. He would head for the Black Sea and start again from the steppes of Asia. With his gold, he would easily buy himself a new empire. Kellan, using everything he has left, unleashes a cloud of hypnotic powder that creates a stunning barrier between him and the Vikindians. Then he draws his sickle and sprints onto the chain. Kellan quickly reaches Frog and grabs hold of him, beginning to drag him toward the tower. Joe sees the scene and understands he must intervene. His aunt looks at him with sad, hopeful eyes and asks him to save the boy. Joe replies that he has no horse. On foot he would never make it. At that moment Ethan whistles, and from the thick of the garden Nestor bursts out at full speed. Joe recognizes his horse immediately. Florakis calls him over, and the horse obeys. When Nestor reaches him, the professor touches his flank and brushes his mane. Nestor seems to gain a strength and energy Joe has never seen in him. For a moment, though, Joe hesitates — the horse has no saddle, and without one he cannot ride well. But the hesitation lasts only a heartbeat. When Nestor comes close, Joe leaps onto him in one motion. The aunt orders Frances to play the horn. The horn's melody dissolves the barrier of hypnotic powder and reinvigorates everyone present. Joe can now charge at full gallop onto the chain. Then, once he has passed, the aunt signals Frances to stop the music. She wants Joe to succeed on his own, without help. At full speed and without hesitation, Nestor gets very close to the fugitives. Hearing the sound of hooves drawing nearer, Kellan turns and,

incredulous, sees a horse galloping toward him at full speed. Joe pulls out a blade of grass he picked in the garden and begins to play it. Frog, watching him from the corner of his eye, understands that Joe is preparing the horse for something and begins to struggle. With the help of the dolphin, he manages to twist the sickle back toward Kellan and cuts him deeply in the leg, freeing himself — while Joe signals to Nestor that it is time to jump. When Joe reaches the zenith of the jump's arc, he leans over the horse's back and grabs Frog and the calf in mid-air, then sets them down on the horse's rump. The animal lands and bolts toward the Tower. The Grand Druid stops, knowing he has been outplayed. When Joe and Frog are safe, the aunt signals to Frances to resume playing. The melodious, angelic music of the horn begins to make appear in the sky what looks like a true aurora borealis. The more Frances plays, the more this aurora gains color and intensity. At a gesture from the aunt, all the Vikindians present point their sickles toward a precise point in the sky. The aurora begins to condense vertically above Kellan's head, and in a swirling motion, like a fountain cascade, the souls of the Vikindians descend, circling around the druid and then enveloping him in a cocoon of energy. This energy spreads along the entire span of the chain, which begins to heat up and turn red. The chain detaches at both ends and starts wrapping itself around Kellan until it becomes a glowing ball of plasma that slowly rises and, once it reaches a certain height, plunges into the water like lightning. An underwater explosion marks that the Grand Druid is once again imprisoned. When the explosion reaches the surface, a golden sickle shoots through the air like a missile and lands in Johanna's hands, who catches it mid-flight. "Finally, I have my sickle back," she exclaims.

Set 9

The druids have all been pulverized, and Kellan is once again imprisoned. The Vikindians have all survived, though some bear the marks of battle on their bodies. But the sound of the horn has already healed them greatly. They will recover in a few days. From the Topkapi landing stage, Monsignor McAllan and the Grand Master of the Knights disembark. The other Vikindians greet them from above and invite them to join them. While they are still on the quay, they hear someone calling from the sea: it is Frog, riding two dolphins that are leading a whole pod. Johanna says that the dolphins will be the new guardians of the Druid. The Sultan, agreeing with Johanna, orders his Grand Vizier to issue a law covering the entire empire, banning dolphin hunting. The minister replies that it will be done today. Meanwhile Joe and Parodi, on horseback, cross the Galata Bridge. They carry with them the fake manuscript and the ouroboroi-less flute of the Grand Druid, all taken from his room. The three prelates follow them, also on horseback. Their involvement was crucial in managing to raise the chain. The Sultan will reward them generously, asking them to keep silent about what they have seen and heard. As soon as he reaches the palace garden, Joe immediately goes to look for Frances and embraces her, while the aunt thanks Parodi for his timing and for agreeing to risk his life. During Joe's embrace, suddenly, Frances sees the tattoo crumble from her arm and feels a transformation inside her. She no longer changes appearance: everyone now sees her as Joe has always seen her. Her curse is broken. She can still change form, but only at will — just like in her grandmother Taigi's

time. Aunt Johanna arrives on the scene and gives Frances her grandmother's sickle. She has rediscovered her true power, and therefore she has the right to keep it. She is a granddaughter Taigi would be proud of. Joe turns to his aunt, asking for explanations. He had long suspected that the providential help from those animals throughout their journey had in fact been her doing. But why make him go through all that effort to search for the horn when it had never actually been stolen? His aunt then raises her sickle to the sky and calls everyone to her, saying she has explanations to give, because the Vikindians — tribal chiefs included — were, in various ways, unaware of many aspects of the affair. And Johanna, along with the few others who knew, had been so skilled at keeping the secret that all the Vikindians firmly believed the horn had truly disappeared. When everyone is gathered around her, Johanna begins.

Set 10

The release of Kellan in 1761 had caused deep concern among the Vikindians, and especially within the McAllan family. Kellan would certainly attempt to steal the Golden Horn to free Cathbad and the others. So the vigilance over the monastery had been reinforced. When, in 1798, the anti-English uprisings were about to break out, some Vikindians had noticed strange movements between Cork and Dublin. Ewerard and his wife, with newborn Johanna, had come from America, summoned to Cork by the abbot of the monastery under the pretext of baptizing their daughter. It was during her baptism that the

horn was transferred from the crypt where it was kept to the baby's cradle, hidden inside the pillow. The ceremony ended, and the McAllans immediately boarded a ship back to America before the English could launch a counteroffensive and the rebels barricaded themselves inside the monastery. From that moment on, the horn had always been kept in that cradle — the same cradle where Fergus, Joe, and Ethan also slept. Joe asks his aunt why he, of all people, had been kept in the dark about the Vikindians, and why no one had helped him develop his power when everyone else in the family had one and knew the whole story. His aunt replies that his power is a very particular one. It is, in fact, an inner power — like his father's. It is one of the most difficult to activate. Ever since the attempted kidnapping of Caroline, they knew that Kellan had taken on human form and was indistinguishable from any other human being. They also knew he had followers whom he had likely assilicated. But they too were invisible among humans. Then little Frances disappeared. They needed someone capable of recognizing Kellan, unmasking his organization, and above all finding Frances. Not an easy task, because the girl could change her appearance — and it was to be expected that Kellan would twist that power to his advantage, turning the child into a mutant unrecognizable to anyone. And that is exactly what happened. These considerations emerged precisely when Joe reached the age at which he should have been initiated into Vikindian life. Aunt Johanna had already understood what his power was. Since childhood, Joe had been able to select the best horses simply by looking at them. It didn't take long to realize that Joe could see the inner potential of those animals — that he could understand who and what they were beyond appearances. He would therefore be able to do the same with

people... or with non-people — meaning Kellan and his followers. And above all, he would be able to save Frances by recognizing her for what she was, not for how she appeared. But a power of that kind, so disruptive and so crucial for the entire Vikindian community, does not activate easily. It requires strong inner conviction and a very specific emotional frame for it to emerge in its full force. Fergus and Caroline, in agreement with Johanna, chose not to tell Joe anything about the existence of a shaman aunt, the Vikindians, or the powers — so as not to compromise the development in Joe of a strong Vikindian consciousness. His power had to emerge when he found himself face-to-face with Kellan. And so it did. Joe found his power, forced Kellan into the open, and saved Frances. At this point, his aunt hands Joe her sickle: he has earned it. Joe asks her why, after so much effort to recover it, she is giving the sickle to him. The abbot answers, joining the group together with the Sultan, who has now been reached by Olaf. The Vikindians of the imperial guard carry a long velvet cloth containing something. The abbot announces that Johanna has now earned the title that Allan once held — a title no one after him has ever received: the title of Arch-Druid of the Vikindians. Olaf steps forward with the small coffer that had been hidden beneath the cloth and, once he stands before her, opens it. Inside lies a shining sickle made of a metal different from gold. The abbot takes it and explains that this is Allan's sickle, crafted from the gold of Allan's old sickle and the cathbandonium left over from the making of the horn. It possesses extraordinary powers, and only a few are capable of wielding it. Allan had instructed his successors to give that instrument only to someone who had truly succeeded in fusing their European soul with their Indian one — and only to someone who had mastered the entanglement between the

Forces of Nature and the Forces of the Sky. Johanna receives the sickle amid thunderous applause. Meanwhile Olaf approaches the Sultan, who watches the scene with joy. He asks him why, if he is a Vikindian, he never told him — and why, in fact, no one knows. The Sultan replies that it was not hard to guess. As everyone at court knows, his father was the previous Sultan, but his mother was a Native American woman. His eunuchs had bought her from some merchant of exotic slaves, and once placed in the harem, she soon became the father's favorite, eventually giving birth to the future heir to the throne. His mother was Vikindian and had passed the power on to him. She ensured that her son received both an Ottoman and a Vikindian education, and she died only after he had already received his sickle. Because it is not true that no one knew of his Vikindian heritage: Johanna McAllan had always known, and she had even been his tutor for a short time. Birgid, in her archive, has an entire dossier on him. Joe knows that the guardian animals of the five imprisoned druids have often suffered crises which, without the horn, risked degenerating into a mass release of the imprisoned creatures. Isn't that right? Were those just legends meant to pressure him into leaving quickly? "Not at all," his aunt replies. Both the Argentine pumas and the Yellowstone bison, as well as the Aegean dolphins and the others, are constantly threatened by epidemics, forage shortages, and predators. Johanna, regularly — ever since she abandoned white civilization — travelled to the four places of imprisonment and played the horn to keep the totem animals healthy, thus preventing the guardians' situation from being compromised while maintaining the secret of the horn that had never disappeared. In Catania, a few weeks earlier, after Kellan's passage, his aunt had intervened and restored order with the horn. In fact, after

the night in Palermo, Parodi had returned the horn to her, and she had immediately rushed to Manfreda. Her dear friend's health improved greatly, as everyone can see, and moreover she said nothing to Mario so as not to compromise the trap that, through Joe and the others, had been set for Kellan. Joe also wants to know why Nestor is in Constantinople. Crossing the Atlantic is dangerous for a horse. His aunt replies that she was the one who wanted Nestor to come. As soon as he landed in Europe, she treated him with the horn, and Florakis — who has no power over plants, but does to animals what all the other Vikindians do to plants — infused him with additional vital energy. Joe still doesn't understand. What does Nestor have to do with any of this? His aunt had asked her brother to bring Nestor to Europe because she knew that Joe — only on Nestor's back — would be able to confront Kellan once and for all and find, or rediscover, himself by defeating his inner fears. But Joe's and Nestor's task is not finished yet. Brooke had informed his aunt, after Ganja, of the existence of a mare with extraordinary characteristics, a creature spoken of in legends throughout the Ottoman Empire. That mare, brought back to Constantinople by the Pasha of the Galata Tower, was to be the one running in the horse race organized by the Sultan at the Pasha's request — and for some time it had been known that the Pasha was in fact Kellan. And that mare, Kellan had assilicated just like his most loyal men. Brooke, who had luckily managed to touch her before the caravan left Ganja, had told her that the mare felt metallic to the touch and slightly warm. Just like Kellan. A few days later, it was Mark who informed her that the mare from Ganja would be the star of the race being held today — running for the Pasha's stable, therefore for the Grand Druid. Joe still cannot see the connection with Nestor. His aunt explains that yes, Kellan is

defeated, but his organization is not. Marlowe and O'Hara were not at Topkapi, nor were Russell and Wayne. And they were not at the tower. Therefore, they are all at the hippodrome, unaware of what has happened here. While she and the others deal with the remaining druids at the hippodrome, it will be Joe who must run in that race and challenge O'Hara, the jockey of the Ottoman Co. His goal is to eliminate him before he understands what has happened and escapes. Only Joe, with his power and courage, and Nestor, with his strength and speed, can stand up to such a formidable warrior and to a horse with such extraordinary abilities — abilities Kellan has further enhanced. Joe protests. He is not a jockey, and Nestor is a warhorse — what do they have to do with a race? Fergus tells Joe that during the race he will pass on his own power: the power to believe in one's inner self and to instill confidence, courage, and determination in those around him — horses included. It is thanks to this ability that he succeeded in the world of horse racing and later in politics. Then Ethan speaks. He explains that his power is the ability to smell the scent of victory in men and animals. This makes him a great bookmaker: horses and jockeys always smell of victory or defeat. He chooses only the winners. Precisely because of this power, Ethan asks Joe to look closely at Nestor. Joe looks at him for the first time with the eyes of his own power. Now he sees him for what he truly is. Despite all the training that made him an extraordinary warhorse, Nestor is above all a racehorse. In disbelief, Joe watches the animal's physique shift before his eyes: the muscles in his legs strengthen, and his outline becomes more streamlined. Now there is not a minute to lose. The race will begin in less than ninety minutes, and they must hurry to the hippodrome. Carriages and mounts are arranged for the Sultan and the Vikindians, and the caravan sets off. The McAllans are

all on horseback. Joe approaches his mother, Caroline, to ask what her power is. She tells him to look behind them. Horses and carriages, at her command, leave blooming footprints.

Set 11

In a packed Istanbul hippodrome, Marlowe, Russell, and the others druids sit in the VIP seats near the royal box reserved for the Sultan. They wonder why the Grand Druid is taking so long. He should already be there, occupying the Sultan's box as the new sovereign. Because, if the plan had succeeded, by now the real Sultan would already have been killed. This delay has resulted in very few people sitting in the stands: everyone is waiting outside for the Sultan's arrival, so they can greet him and pay their respects as tradition requires. Near the royal box stands Mark, responsible for organizing the race. He is waiting for the Sultan to give him the go-ahead to bring the horses onto the track and start the competition. Russell nervously checks his watch, and Marlowe cannot sit still from impatience. A wealthy Ottoman passes in front of them, followed by his many wives dressed in black, wearing veils or burqas. There are quite a few of them, as the man orders some to sit in the upper row, others to sit beside the Ottoman Co. guests, and still others to take seats below. The women sit to the sides, behind, and in front of the druids. Marlowe tries to interact with one of them, but she looks at him with disdain and turns away. Then a roar rises from the crowd. The Sultan has arrived. The royal procession enters the box, and the men of the Ottoman Co. are stunned. Instead of the Grand Druid sitting on the throne, there is the usual Sultan — and instead of the druidic guard, Olaf and the Vikindian guard

take their positions to protect him. The original plan called for the Grand Druid to kill the Sultan and take his place, then present himself on the royal platform surrounded by a guard of his best druids. Something must have gone wrong. Marlowe says he wants to go warn O'Hara and starts to stand, but he bumps into the woman beside him. He apologizes as best he can, but she removes her veil — and underneath is Johanna McAllan. Startled, Marlowe looks around and sees, now unveiled, all those who had seemed to be the wives of a wealthy Ottoman. They are in fact Vikindian men and women, all with their sickles drawn. The aunt makes a cutting remark, and the druids have no chance to reply. They are torn apart and explode in a series of magnesium-blue flashes. Meanwhile, Joe has arrived with Nestor at the gate to the track. He hasn't had time to saddle him, but Joe no longer cares — he can ride like this now. The attendants don't have his name on the list of competitors and refuse to let him through. The Sultan, seeing the scene, calls Mark and explains the situation. Mark sends a messenger to the stable exit, and Joe is admitted onto the racetrack. O'Hara sees him and is surprised, but the announcer is already approaching the bell that signals the start. He is so focused that he doesn't notice what is happening in the stands. The Grand Druid has entrusted him with an extremely important mission. Kellan has assilicated the horse in order to test its performance. If the operation succeeded and O'Hara won against horses of flesh and blood, the Druids' army would gain a crucial new weapon — especially with the McAllan horses, which, once the Vikindians were dead, would become theirs.

Set 12

The announcer gives the signal, and the horses burst forward. O'Hara immediately takes the lead, and Joe remains behind in the pack. The first lap finds him among the last. Then Fergus channels his power to Joe through the sickle, and Nestor begins to recover ground. By the end of the second lap, Joe has almost reached O'Hara. Joe watches him from behind, and he focuses so intensely on the man and his horse that their "paint" dissolves — revealing them as beings made of silicon. The crowd murmurs in astonishment, and many, seized by panic, point at the man and the horse, calling them jinn and demons. At a certain point, O'Hara glances toward the royal box, seeking the admiration of his leader — but the Grand Druid is not there. And the Ottoman Co. seats are empty. O'Hara understands it's over. Joe is still behind him, but closing in fast. O'Hara pulls out the ouroboros to throw it at Nestor's legs. He hurls it, and the object whistles through the air — but when it reaches Nestor, the horse leaps and avoids the threat. The ouroboros continues its trajectory toward the stands, where it could kill many people, but Odette, lightning-fast, catches it in mid-air. Joe and Nestor draw up alongside O'Hara. Joe is on the inside, O'Hara on the outside. The druid draws his obsidian dagger, and Joe pulls out his sickle. They grapple along the straight. Joe realizes they are approaching the curve and that he is in a disadvantageous position. He maneuvers the sickle so that the dagger gets trapped between its blade, then makes Nestor brake — and in doing so, O'Hara's weapon is torn from his hand. O'Hara accelerates again, but Nestor is now fully charged and catches him on the right. Joe strikes with the sickle but

misses. O'Hara then slows down to remain behind Nestor while still staying dangerously close. On the final straight, O'Hara suddenly leaps off his horse — to the utter disbelief of the crowd — and, taking advantage of the surprise, manages to reach the exit and slip out of the hippodrome. Joe doesn't notice, because he still hears O'Hara's horse right behind him and continues his run toward the finish line. He crosses it first, to the applause of the crowd. O'Hara's shaken horse arrives second and is recovered by Florakis. Joe is astonished, at the end of the race, to realize that O'Hara has escaped. As soon as Joe dismounts, he is celebrated by everyone. But he looks for Frances, and when he finds her, he kisses her to the applause of all. They want to carry him in triumph, but Joe's attention is only for Frances. Nestor and the mare approach the two lovers, and Joe invites Frances to mount her. Then, with a tap of his heels, they set off at a gallop, leaving everyone behind in amazement. Joe and Frances are heading to the Galata Tower to watch the sunset over the Bosphorus — the moment of the day when that narrow stretch of sea truly becomes the Golden Horn.

12

Epilogue

Set 1 – Monastery of Saint Olcan

In a church filled to the brim with elegantly dressed Vikindians, Joe and Frances are married. Father Brandon celebrates the wedding in Cherokee and in Latin, according to the *Indian Mass* missal; on this occasion, he announces his retirement and formally presents his successor, Rory McAllan. After the vows, the aunt plays the horn anda magical, benevolent vibration spreads through all those present.

Set 2 – Bison Inn

The sumptuous wedding banquet is held, of course, at the Bison Inn, which for the occasion looks like a luxury hotel. Serving at the tables are both families of restaurateurs who had welcomed

Joe and Frog before and after the tribal chiefs' dinner. They expressly asked the newlyweds to let *them* handle the wedding catering, with dishes both Irish and from the Indian tradition. The two newlyweds walk among the tables greeting the guests. They stop at the table where Frog is sitting beside Bless and Khulan. The three of them amuse themselves by performing duets or trios reciting Shakespeare, and Joe and Frances are pleased to see that Frog has not only learned English, but has also made peace with the playwright — and has even learned how to use a fork. The three have plans for the future. Bless will give up his position as tribal chief to Professor Hannibal Punicson, but before he can take the role he must improve his Cherokee. So the two of them will go on a long Shakespearean tour among the tribes of North America, spreading knowledge of European dramaturgy and gathering inspiration for works of Indian origin to bring around the world — or at least wherever there are Vikindians capable of appreciating them. Frog was just telling Bless about the story of a certain Pocahontas, which seems promising. Naturally, Frog and Khulan will travel with them. The girl also speaks some Siberian languages that share many similarities with the Indian ones. It will not be difficult for her to perform in *Hamlet* in Cherokee. Caitlin, the cook from their first dinner, passes by carrying a tray. Frog stops her and asks what happened to him and Joe during those hours they cannot remember. The woman, smiling, begins by saying she is sorry if she and her husband caused them any inconvenience, but at that moment they were following the aunt's orders — who had first reassured them that what they were doing was for a good cause. They had always worked closely with Mrs. Auwory and had done nothing that had not been agreed with her beforehand. Feeling herself mentioned, Mrs. Auwory joins

the conversation and explains to Joe and Frog that she was behind the architectural illusion of the Bison Inn. When Joe and Frog arrived in Cork, they found it open and functioning, when in reality it had been a closed, crumbling building for years. The fact is that she has the power to temporarily make old or decaying things and buildings appear new. Even now, as everyone can see, the hotel looks like a royal palace — but only from the inside, because from the outside, as they surely noticed when entering, it still looks like the same decrepit, abandoned building. The meeting of the tribal chiefs that evening had been scheduled there precisely to keep prying eyes away. Unlike O'Hara — whom no one had realized was an infiltrator — Father Brandon had long suspected that Marlowe was a druid, and although he was waiting for the right moment to use him as bait to get to Kellan, he had to avoid at all costs that Marlowe notice the large movements of Vikindians in the city. Kellan had to be forced into the open when and where *they* decided, and they certainly did not want him showing up unexpectedly during a meeting of the tribal chiefs. Joe asks who those unruly women and drunkards were — the ones they found at the hotel when they arrived, who then vanished before the meeting. If the Bison Inn had officially been closed for years and never open to the public, how could those men and women have been there? Caitlin smiles proudly and explains that *that* is her power: to make people appear who are not really there. She asks them to look toward the door. A beautiful woman dressed elegantly enters. She walks through the room as if nothing were unusual — and then slowly fades away. The guests applaud. Caitlin explains that she and her husband Finn own a large Irish pub in New York, which they run together with her sister and brother-in-law. The Plains Indians often call on her when they are threatened by

white settlers. She takes the train as far as it goes and then, on foot or on horseback, reaches the camps. When she is there, the Indian warriors appear — to the eyes of cowboys or soldiers — three or four times more numerous, forcing gunmen and military patrols to give up bothering them. In any case, when it came to handling the food and lodging for both the chiefs and for Joe and Frog, it was Mrs. Auwory who chose her family. She *is*, after all, their tribal chief. And given Caitlin's power, Auwory — being a writer — had the idea of filling the place with ambiguous, vulgar figures to give the evening a dramatic tone. Using her power that night exhausted her greatly. That is why, when Joe and Frog woke up, they found neither her nor her husband, but her sister's family instead. Finn approaches the table to tell Caitlin something and, turning to Joe and Frog, apologizes for the *wanige* incident. He was the one who prepared it to help the two guests sleep more easily, but that evening, through carelessness, it turned out particularly strong. When the chiefs realized the next morning that Joe and Frog were still asleep — and since Auwory could not maintain the illusion of the luxurious palace much longer — they moved them to the room downstairs, which was not structurally unsafe. And although it was old and unattractive, it had at least been cleaned. A kitchen attendant calls Caitlin, and the couple take their leave. Auwory then recounts what happened at the villa. At the dinner, unlike the other chiefs, she knew about the horn and agreed with Johanna to play the naïve one with the others. According to her aunt, neither Joe nor Frog was supposed to know anything new about the horn before meeting Father Brendon. Johanna wanted her nephew and the boy to discover as much as possible about their true nature on their own. She did not intend to influence their process of growth and learning. But Auwory had

prevailed, and not only had Joe and Frog witnessed the first part of the dinner — gaining precious clues for their search — but, with Johanna's help, she had dragged them to the old villa to give them further information so they wouldn't be disoriented by the abbot's words and by what would happen afterward. Not even the mishap with the *wanige* and their long sleep had stopped them. While the aunt kept an eye on them, she and Annabelle, being good Parisians, had enjoyed themselves eating pastries and drinking champagne in the old house. Annabelle was the one who pretended to be a maid when they arrived. And she is the mother of Theo and Odette. Auwory waves toward the table where the French family is seated — where she herself is also sitting. Joe recognizes the woman. Frances asks her why, among so many cities, she chose to move to Paris after the attack she suffered at the villa in Cork at Kellan's hands. Was it to follow in the footsteps of the many painters, sculptors, poets, and artists who consider the French capital the mecca of art The woman confesses that her profession as a writer had nothing to do with it — although being part of the Parisian literary and artistic scene certainly helped her reach a wider readership. The truth is that she is very fond of sweets and, being Irish, she loves to drink. So when she had to leave Cork, she took refuge in Paris, which was and still is the capital of taste, cuisine, fine wine, and pastry. She lives in a house that looks abandoned from the outside but has every comfort inside. In fact, the Druids never noticed her presence in Paris. For this reason, her Paris home is the place where the Vikindians of the city and of France can gather without fear of being discovered or recognized. But now that Kellan is under lock and key and Frances has returned to them, Auwory announces her intention to move back to Cork for a few months each year and to renovate

the villa. The Bison Inn, which—incidentally—is her property, will also have a new life. It will be rebuilt from the foundations up and turned into a charming hotel with a modern, fashionable restaurant downstairs, whose chef will be her Parisian cook. He is a Vikindian as well, and he has the power to turn any dish he prepares into a delicacy. The Bison Inn will be the grand hotel of the Vikindians when they come to Cork to see the horn. Johanna and Brendon approach and ask the newlyweds to come with them. As the couple walks away, Auwory has one last thing to tell them. The head customs officer of Cork is a Vikindian and a close friend of Father Brendon. The prelate smiles and adds that he was the one who asked him to keep Joe and Frog on the ship until all the hotel carriages had departed—and, if possible, a little longer. Had it not been so, and had they not disembarked tired and hungry, the two of them would never have agreed to stay at the Bison Inn, and all of Auwory's efforts to pass them additional information before the meeting at the monastery would have gone up in smoke. Without that knowledge, the story of Allan and the Vikindians would have been far more difficult for them to digest—something that would have delayed, if not jeopardized, their entire quest. And with Kellan at the height of his power, there was no time to lose. Joe asks his aunt why, that evening at the Bison Inn, if the Vikindian tribes are ten, there were only nine chiefs. His aunt suggests that Joe try to imagine who that cat was, the one circling around the table. When he and Frog left the room, she resumed human form. She is, in fact, the tribal chief of the American Vikindians. Frances wants to know about Marlowe and asks the abbot. Brendon replies that he had begun to suspect that novice shortly after his arrival at the monastery. He practically never ate and slept very little. He claimed he was fasting out of Christian charity and spent almost the whole night

praying. The story was well constructed, but Brendon knew that the signs Marlowe displayed could also indicate a connection to Kellan and to the world of his assilicated druids. To observe him more closely — and because of the reputation for holiness he had gained among the brothers — Brendon had promoted him to his assistant. Joe asks why, if the abbot suspected him, he allowed Marlowe to see the manuscript and let him steal it. Brendon replies that what he showed them, and what his siliceous assistant stole, was not the real manuscript. It was a well-made copy, but deliberately full of errors, secretly produced by Birgid with the help of two Vikindian illustrators. If Kellan had tried to play the melody written in that book — very different from the original — he would have been severely harmed physically and would have revealed his location. Displaying the volume openly to entice Marlowe to steal it was part of the trap devised by Johanna. The real manuscript is still kept in the monastery library, but lost among thousands of similar volumes. Only the abbot knows its precise location, and the library is enormous. Marlowe would never have been able to find it, even if he had started searching for it. They arrive at the table where Poniatovsky, Bonaparte, and Demidoff are seated. They greet them warmly. The princess smiles, recalling that she was the one who arranged the little trick with the receptionist in Florence to make their meeting happen. She was also the one who organized the scheme with the hippodrome tickets. The hotel owner is a close friend of theirs and had no problem lending them one of his concierges in exchange for a generous tip for the young man. Under different circumstances she would have sent them official invitations delivered by a liveried footman. But she had been warned by the other tribal chiefs that Joe and Frog were being tailed and that Frances was in the city. Not wanting to draw

the druids' attention to herself through them, she preferred to make their encounter appear completely accidental.mA waiter approaches the table with flutes of champagne. Once everyone has a glass in hand, Poniatowsky raises a toast to the newlyweds. The celebrations conclude on the quay of Cork's harbor, where the Danish princess's yacht is moored. As a wedding gift, the princess has placed the vessel at their disposal for their honeymoon. The crew is waiting for the couple to take them on a Mediterranean cruise, stopping in the most famous locations. Frances gives her parents one last embrace — now reconciled — and promises to visit them on the way back.

Set 3 – Topkapi

The vessel carrying Joe and Frances, after a month at sea and one last romantic stop in Athens, brings them to Constantinople before beginning the return journey. The Sultan, informed in advance of their arrival, immediately invites them to the palace, where they are received with great honors. He begins by telling them that he has ceded the island of Nisyros to Greece, as a gesture toward the suffering the Greek population was forced to endure under Kellan's grip. And besides, the King of Greece is a Vikindian like them. Thanks to Brooke, the Ottoman government has obtained full control of Ottoman Co., including its financial assets and foreign properties. The Sultan will use those resources to build infrastructure to improve the lives of the poorest subjects: nurseries, schools, hospitals, orphanages, retirement homes. He will also finance the construction of ports,

roads, and railways to foster the empire's economic growth and development. Before dismissing them, the Sultan gives them a surprise. The Khan of Ganja's mare — who, after being de-silicated by the horn's music, had returned to the imperial stables — is his wedding gift to them. She is already on her way to America, cared for personally by Mark. As the audience is about to end, Brooke arrives and hands the Sultan some written notes. The Sultan reads them with interest. Brooke explains that after testing the dome in Ganja, his power is now amplified. He can speak and understand the most disparate languages and dialects. For this reason, the Sultan has commissioned him to produce a monumental linguistic work on all the dialects and idioms of the empire. It will take years to complete, but once finished, it will be the most important linguistic work ever written to date. Brooke escorts them out of Topkapi and offers to take them to the Galata Tower, where Parodi has settled. The Sultan has entrusted him and his company with the management of the tower and the new chain. During the journey, Brooke explains that he was the one who asked Emilio to help them enter the tower. Emilio is also a Vikindian — as well as a Knight of Malta — although they knew him as the puppeteer of the souk, as a waiter, and above all as the acrobat with the bear. Once it had been confirmed that Frog was inside the tower, Brooke was certain that Joe and Frances would attempt a sortie to free him. He had asked Emilio to keep an eye on them and, once they reached the tower, to lend a hand if needed. If things had gone badly, hidden in a nearby building with Emilio were a eunuch and a detachment of Olaf's men. At the first sign of trouble, Emilio would have alerted them, and they would have appeared at the tower gate, demanding — by order of the Sultan — that the two intruders be handed over, since they were guests

at court by the Sultan's personal invitation. The Pasha's men, or Kellan himself, would not have been able to oppose such an order without compromising their cover.

Set 4 - Galata

Parodi — while the tower bustles with construction workers engaged in major restoration works — welcomes them warmly and introduces them to his brother-in-law Ermione, the brother of his late wife. He is a Vikindian and possesses an extraordinary power: he can communicate through ultrasounds. To demonstrate it, they go down to the shore of the Bosphorus. That stretch of sea is full of dolphins, and Joe and Frances expect them to be the focus of the demonstration. Ermione begins his mental call, but the dolphins seem not to respond. Soon, however, several orcas emerge from the water. Joe and Frances panic and shout to Ermione to get the dolphins to safety before the orcas devour them, but Parodi reassures them. Ermione is now the new guardian of Kellan — the murderer of his sister. And the orcas, the very same ones that patrolled the waters of Nisyros, have also become his jailers, together with the dolphins. These orcas no longer eat dolphins or seals; they feed exclusively on sardines, mackerel, and salmon, of which that stretch of sea is rich. They ask him how he managed to tame them, and Ermione replies that he had always communicated with dolphins but had never tried to communicate with orcas. But then Professor Merk, once the Grand Druid had been imprisoned, explained to him that orcas ARE dolphins. And Merk is something more than a natural sciences professor: he is the guardian of Lugus, the gorilla — one of the golden animals imprisoned — who is kept

prisoner in Iceland. Frances, puzzled, asks why, if Ermione can communicate with dolphins, he wasn't recruited to search for Frog after his disappearance. Parodi replies that Ermione, upon hearing of Frog's disappearance, had indeed reached Santorini on the chiefs' orders to communicate with the dolphins. The cetaceans told him that Frog had been taken into the territory of the orcas and had never returned. He had been captured by the lord of the orcas, who had enlisted their help in carrying out the kidnapping. At that point it was clear that Frog was Kellan's prisoner — but he could have been anywhere in the Mediterranean, or even in the open ocean. Orcas live in all the seas of the world. Adonia, from Santorini, had telegraphed Joe's father to report that Frances remembered only one detail about the Grand Druid — the word *"Ottoman."* Fergus, for whom that word stirred many memories, began investigating and uncovered the bank, the companies, and the properties belonging to the Grand Druid's empire. All of them were owned by a certain Vadim Buran, Pasha of Nisyros. At that point, it was easy to put two and two together and confirm that the Pasha and Kellan were the same person. Just as Fergus finished his investigation, Joe's message arrived — sent through the Knights of Malta — confirming everything his father had discovered. When Johanna was informed of the latest developments, she contacted the Sultan, and together they forced Kellan into the open. In Ganja, the golden dome — as it stands today — was built according to the original plan, which was indeed to make it enormous. The story about enlarging it was just a fabrication to make it believable that the Sultan would send the Pasha to that distant region. Once again, it was Johanna who orchestrated the entire plan, because she wanted Frog to experience captivity and the journey — to help him grow and mature. She did not

fear for his safety, but to be more at ease she arranged, with the Sultan, Brooke's unexpected diplomatic mission. The diplomat would keep an eye on Frog, and both in Ganja and during the return trip, Dunya would be there as well — someone Johanna had known since childhood. Dunya is not a Vikindian, but it was Johanna who taught her swordsmanship. In the packet Brooke delivered to Dunya there was a message for the aunt, stating that Frog was not only safe and sound, but had grown immensely — and, on top of that, had returned from Ganja with a sweetheart. Johanna had been right once again. Brooke confirms this and explains that the dome of Ganja is now fully operational. The Sultan, the Khan, and the Russian Vikindians have guaranteed that the road to and from Ganja will always be open and safe for the Vikindians. In this way, everyone will have the opportunity to refine their powers. That evening, the four of them go out to dinner, and Brooke tells them about his adventures with Frog in Ganja. The next morning, Joe and Frances set off again on their return journey.

Set 5 – Nysiros

From Constantinople, on their route toward London, Joe and Frances make a stop in Nysiros. To reach it, their vessel passes through the Santorini archipelago. Adonia's island is now clearly visible; the vapors are gone, and seals swim freely in the stretch of sea dividing the islands, whose cliffs are now full of these mammals. Waiting for them in Nysiros is Adonia, who takes them around to show them the changes. The island of Nysiros had been liberated by the Knights of Malta on their way to Constantinople, on the very day of Kellan's

capture and thanks to Joe's warning. With the Grand Druid's disappearance in the Bosphorus, the tattoos of all the druids crumbled, finally setting them free. Each of them remembered practically nothing of their druidic experience. Many, confused at finding themselves on a Mediterranean island despite being German, Anglo-Saxon, or Scandinavian — with their last clear memories dating back to the day of their "abduction" in Europe — asked to be repatriated. Others chose to remain and live here. With Kellan gone and the tattoos reduced to dust, the islanders were able to embrace again the loved ones who had gone to the continent and never returned. The local population is now booming. Both the former druids who stayed and the Greek residents are free, and Adonia — appointed mayor of the island by the King of Greece — has already opened a multidisciplinary school. Indeed, the island has passed under Greek control. The Sultan ceded it to the Hellenic king in exchange for the Sublime Porte taking over the Ottoman Co. empire, whose resources the Sultan will use to modernize Ottoman infrastructure and to fund projects that will allow his subjects to rise out of poverty. The island is now a lush, flourishing garden thanks to the Vikindians and to the melody of the horn, which the aunt came to play to allow the island's vegetation — devastated by the druids — to grow back. The structures the druids had built have been transformed into pleasant little villas full of greenery and flowers, ready to host Vikindian guests, Indian school groups, and visitors. In one of them they find a large group of Sioux children with their chaperones. The aunt sent them, through Joe's father, so they could breathe the healthy Mediterranean air, as they suffered from iodine deficiency. The facilities around the volcano have been turned into thermal baths, making use of the hot water, steam, and geothermal energy. The complex

— where many islanders now work — is run by Adonia and Professor Zander Florakis. Joe asks the professor why the Grand Druid never realized he was a Vikindian, and Florakis replies that the affinity all other Vikindians have with plants, *he* has with animals. His power is different — the same as that of his ancestor who, in 1761, was Kellan's guardian and watched helplessly as the seals were slaughtered before the Grand Druid's escape. His power is to speak with animals. That is why he was Garibaldi's official veterinarian during the conquest of the Two Sicilies. After helping and treating Manfreda's birds, he had secretly boarded the ship with Joe and the others in Italy to welcome them in Santorini and help them settle in and find Adonia. Then, when they left for Constantinople, the professor boarded again and returned to Garibaldi shortly before he entered Naples in triumph. The fact that he is a professor and retired is not a lie: Florakis taught veterinary science for forty years at the University of Athens before granting himself a well-earned rest. There is, however, another extraordinary thing Adonia and Florakis want to show them. They take them to the volcano's caldera. Florakis pulls out the two-piece flute without the ouroboros — the one recovered in Galata — approaches the edge of the caldera, and begins to play. The lava starts to bubble until it expels a blob of incandescent metal that rises straight upward. The Sioux children applaud, delighted. Florakis keeps playing until the blob gradually takes the shape of a sickle. Then, once the metamorphosis is complete, the sickle glides down to the professor's feet. Florakis puts on a glove and picks it up while it is still warm. Florakis explains that after Nysiros was devastated by the metal monsters and the druid goldsmiths were killed, it had become impossible to produce sickles for everyone. With them, the secret technique that for centuries had provided

"working" sickles to the druids had been lost. For this reason, from Allan onward, sickles were passed from one Vikindian to another. Naturally, the practice of disappearing into trees and fusing the sickle with the wood had ended already in Allan's time, after the unification of the rituals between druids and shamans — that is, at the birth of the Vikindians. But without the island forges, when a Vikindian died, his sickle was left to his heirs or to the young ones who were developing their powers. Now, with the technology of the forces of the Earth, they can produce as many as needed. Joe has a doubt. If the Vikindians no longer disappear into trees, why did Manfreda tell them that the pistachio tree marking the entrance to her home on Etna contains her husband's sickle inside it? Adonia smiles and explains that Gennaro, the father of Irene and Pietro, had the power to transform himself into any tree. He was already quite an old man by the time his children became adults, because Manfreda had married him when she was very young and he was already advanced in years. When Gennaro felt that the moment had come for him to say farewell to his family, he placed himself at the entrance of the compound with his sickle held tightly to his chest, and he transformed into a tree forever, absorbing the sickle into the wood. Then Adonia and Florakis take their guests to Aspronisi as well, to play with the seals and to strengthen their health by listening to the music of the cave. There too, visitors have arrived in Santorini to heal — a mixture of Europeans and Indians. Joe and Frances enjoy a few days of intimacy between the thermal baths and the cave, and then they take to the sea again.

Set 6 – London

Welcoming them in London are Cousin Richard and Frances's parents. Joe is taken by his cousin to the club, while Frances leaves with her parents to go home to Stratford-upon-Avon. At the club, Cousin Richard takes Joe to see Hannibal Punicson. The professor is already officially the new tribal chief of the Vikindians of England, and he is the one who handled the English affairs of the druids. Thanks to a blank judicial warrant signed by Queen Victoria herself, they managed to enter Russell's offices and the Bank, reconstructing the extent of the intricate network of companies and properties that Kellan and his men had built over the decades. The assets of Ottoman Co. have passed to the Sultan, and thus many of the residences have become diplomatic headquarters of the Ottoman Empire — though not all of them. A portion has remained with the Vikindians so they may use them according to their needs. Joe asks what became of the underground temples Kellan had carved beneath the buildings. Punicson replies that Johanna made sure to visit each of the residences and flooded them with the melody of the horn. The earth shifted and filled the underground spaces again, sealing the void that Kellan had created by manipulating the forces of Nature. Furthermore, through a major joint effort between the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Smithsonian, intensive excavations will be carried out at La Grange, and the ancient temple that hosted the annual gatherings of the druids — where Cathbad's betrayal took place — will be rebuilt. The orphanage of Saint Conan of Kilder has been taken over by Prince Albert, who immediately transformed it back into a high-level educational institution for intelligent but

poor boys and girls who could not otherwise afford an education. The children and adolescents found there, now without their tattoos, will finish their studies and be guided toward a normal life. In the bank's vault, an enormous diamond of over 8,000 carats was also found. It will soon be the centerpiece of an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and afterwards it will be secured in the Tower of London together with the royal treasure. The professor also has a file for Joe. In the druidic archive, evidence was found showing that Dan Wight, the first husband of his mother Caroline, had not died in combat but had been killed by assassins sent by Kellan, who wanted to silence the officer after he discovered the true identity of the owner of Ottoman Co.. If Dan had not died, Joe would never have been born. But perhaps his mother has the right to know. Frances returns to her childhood home. She sees her grandmother's room again, and then her own, which has remained untouched as if she had never left. She and her parents share their versions of the story and clear up their doubts — including where her grandmother is buried: by her own wish, she now rests in Greenland. Then together they go to the Jewish pawnbroker in Warwick. The man asks to see all her credentials, including Frances's marriage certificate. Satisfied with what he sees, the man issues her a bank draft with several zeros. With that money, contributed by her and by other Vikindian women, an international charitable foundation will be created to help runaway adolescents make peace with themselves and with their families. In various parts of Europe this is a serious social problem, and naïve boys and girls often fall into the hands of unscrupulous people — like Kellan. Joe and Frances reunite a few days later for the final leg of their journey. At the Southampton pier, while waiting for the ocean liner that

will take them to America, they ask Cousin Richard what his power is. He smiles and asks them to look at him carefully and say what they notice. The answer is that he is always elegant and well-kept, and indeed all of London considers him the most fashionable gentleman in the Empire. He bursts out laughing and tells them that what he is wearing are actually rags from a junk dealer — well-kept and well-cleaned, but rags nonetheless. His power is to make even the most dreadful scraps of fabric appear elegant and well-tailored. When the ship sounds the first boarding call for passengers, Cousin Richard suggests putting his power to the test. He picks up a fishing net lying on the pier and drapes it over himself like a shawl. As if nothing were unusual, he walks up the first-class gangway, followed by Joe and Frances, and is greeted with great deference by the ship's purser. Richard explains that he is only seeing off his relatives who are departing and will soon return to shore. The man does not notice the net. Then two well-dressed young ladies walk by, stop to admire Richard, and compliment him on his beautiful cruise outfit. Before saying goodbye to Richard, Joe wants to know who booked the hotel where he and Frog stayed the first time they were in London. Who was the mysterious footman who came to fetch them and gave them the invitation to the Club? Richard smiles. He swears he knew nothing about any of it; he only played dumb at the museum when they wanted information about Celts and Vikings in America. Bless's orders, even before they left the United States. In any case, it was Uncle Arnold who arranged everything. The footman was the uncle himself, and he provided the invitation as a member of the club. The uncle had been informed of their departure by a letter from Caroline, and he was the one who intercepted the telegram from Cork. He had said nothing to Richard because Joe and Frog needed

to earn his trust in order to continue their search. If Richard had thrown them out, it would have meant they were not suited for the task. The steamer sounds its horn to signal that visitors must disembark. Joe and Frances say goodbye to their cousin, who returns to shore. Joe asks him when he will come to visit them, and Richard replies that it will be soon. His mother is Shoshone, and the tribe — along with all his relatives — lives in the Rocky Mountains. When he goes to visit his mother's family, Richard always stops by the McAllans and has Ethan take him to horse races all around Kentucky and beyond.

Set 7 – United States – Washington

When they land in New York, Joe would like to take Frances to his mother at the ranch as soon as possible, and then ride with his wife toward the horizon — perhaps with Nestor and the Sultan's mare. But first they must stop in Washington. Their first visit is to the Smithsonian, because Professor Punicson has entrusted them with a packet to deliver to Merk. Their surprise is great when, in the institution's meeting room, they find Irene, Manfreda's daughter. Noticing their astonishment, Merk explains that he has long been the guardian of the beast in Greenland, while Irene is the new guardian of the beast in Argentina. Until now, Anita's family had taken care of it, and since Irene is to marry one of them and move to South America, she — their goddaughter — has been chosen to look after the beast, given the experience she gained with her mother. Let us not forget that the beast down there is a flying dragon. Who better than Irene, whose power is to transform into any bird? They ask her about her brother Pietro. Well, he too has a new

assignment: he has become the guardian of Etna. What kind of power does Pietro have? Something related to birds, like his mother and sister? Better, Irene replies. Her brother has control over rodents — the preferred food of birds of prey. Manfreda has given up her position because she wants to move to Greenland. She is now of a certain age, and the Mediterranean heat has become unbearable for her. In Greenland, in the Vikindian oasis, she will live among her peers in a cheerful eternal spring until the day she decides... to join theGreat Spirit. Merk interrupts his sentence to announce that Johanna has donated her collection of notebooks to the Smithsonian. It is one of the most extraordinary sets of ethnographic notes on Native Americans ever produced by a white person. The news has spread through universities all over the world, and the institution has been flooded with letters requesting permission to study them. The Smithsonian will publish an illustrated edition with Johanna's original drawings, and the first print run is already fully booked. Joe and Frances hand Merk the two-piece flute without the ouroboros, the one left behind by Kellan. They apologize for not having brought back the original artifacts, but Punicson interrupts them. He opens a box in his desk and shows them Kellan's flute. But wasn't it turned into a rag by Demidoff? Yes — but thanks to Mario's power, they restored it to its original form. Now the museum truly has a unique piece in its collection. Merk presses a button on his desk, and the silent attendant reappears. He takes charge of the case containing the regenerated flute and the one recovered in Galata, wrapped in a cloth. The professor writes a number on a slip of paper and hands it to the man, who leaves without saying a word. Before letting them go, Punicson takes them to the institution's physics cabinet. On a table there is a sort of music

box playing the melody of the horn. Above it, an ouroboros of the kind used by the druids seems to rotate while floating in the air. The professor explains that it is the vibrations emitted by that music that keep it suspended and make it spin. The ouroboroi and the obsidian swords used at Topkapi shattered at the sound of the horn. But many others were found in Kellan's residences. They will be sent back to Nysiros so they can return to the volcano from which they came. Only two will remain in circulation: the one at the Smithsonian — the ouroboros recovered by Odette at the racetrack in Costantinople — and the one in London, kept at the Knights of the Bath Club. Joe asks what the three serpents symbolize. Merk explains that they represent the three phases of druidic magic: solicitation, when the flute or the horn is played; reception of the vibrations by Heaven and Earth; and then manifestation — the appearance of the Forces of Nature in the form of an event. The same process occurs when one summons one's personal powers or when the sickle is used.

Set 8 – The Congress and The White House

After the Smithsonian, Joe and Frances go to Congress, to Joe's father's office. They find him extremely busy and assume it is because the country is in the midst of a civil war. Instead, without downplaying the war effort, his father tells them that he has succeeded in getting Congress to schedule the debate on abolishing buffalo hunting. The bill is supported by the President and has the votes to pass. It is only a matter of days. Joe and Frances say they are ready to leave for Kentucky and, if possible, would take the evening train. The senator tells them

not to rush, because that evening they are expected at the White House for a private dinner with President Lincoln. At dinner at the White House, they find Dunya — in an elegant Western evening gown — accompanied by Brooke. Dunya is visiting the United States to admire the Shakespearean performances of Bless, Frog, and Khulan directly among the Native peoples. Those three are now in Yellowstone. So the two of them will travel with Joe and Frances as far as Kentucky, and then continue on to Fort Cheyenne, where Colonel Custer, by order of the President, will escort them to the Indian territories. Brooke has kept the President informed of Joe's every move in Europe, but Lincoln wants to hear every detail. He also asks about Johanna and expresses his delight at the work she and her nephew have done to save America — and the world — from a threat as terrible as the awakening of the five monsters. At the end of dinner, Lincoln thanks Joe and Frances for what they have done and gives them a presidential medal. He also announces that, once the war is over, he intends to declare the Yellowstone area a national park and to leave it in perpetual custody of the Indian tribes. Cheyenne — which will be elevated from fort to city — will be the gateway through which the two worlds, European and Indian, will meet. But then, what would become of the McAllan lands in Wyoming? If that territory were to become a national park, how could the McAllans repay the banks Joe's father had borrowed from to purchase it? Lincoln tells him that they will keep a fine ranch which, thanks to what his father has already paid, is free of any mortgage, while the rest of the land has already been purchased by the Treasury, which has settled all of the McAllans' debts with the banks.

Set 9 – Kentucky

With Dunya and Brooke, the next day Joe and Frances leave for Kentucky, where they find Caroline and Joe's brother. Mark is also at the ranch. In fact, Poniatowsky and the cardinal have ordered him to procure a McAllan horse for the Pope — white, if possible. But not a warhorse, as they first thought. They have opted for a racehorse because, given Garibaldi's successes, the Pope will be better off fleeing rather than fighting when the Italians take Rome. Joe's brother has made a fortune from the bets on the Istanbul race, and now every European racetrack wants him as organizer — and bookmaker — of events. Starting next year, Ascot will be organized by him, at the personal request of Prince Albert, who, being passionate about racing, received flattering diplomatic dispatches from the British ambassador in Turkey after the Constantinople race. Therefore, it will now fall to Joe to carry on the McAllan stables. Joe, who no longer has any trouble with racehorses, declares himself ready to take over the family business. From Nestor and the mare from Ganja, a new lineage will be born — champions as swift in racing as they are formidable in battle. If that proves true, he might indeed win the President's Prize for his excellent mounts, and he could give the family name to this new super-breed of horses. Joe, however, will shift the center of gravity of the McAllan stables to the new ranch in Wyoming. That is where he has decided to establish his residence together with Frances. They will take care of building from scratch the main house, the staff quarters, and the horse stables. They will employ only Native personnel. The couple chose Wyoming because they want to raise their children not far from the Indians and from the aunt

Johanna. It is also the most effective way for them to learn Cherokee. And in any case, they would be only a few hours by train from the McAllan grandparents. Fergus and Caroline are very happy about this and remind them that Kentucky is close to the major ports from which the transatlantic ships to Europe depart. Their English grandparents will also be glad to spend time with the grandchildren. Joe also tells his mother about Wight and what was discovered in London. His mother is moved, but she comforts her son, saying she is proud of him for having put an end, once and for all, to that murderous monster. And that, ever since Wight disappeared and she met Fergus, she has never stopped loving Joe's father. Joe has one last curiosity. Granted that he had never realized that his family — and he himself — were Vikindians, and especially that Ethan and his parents had powers, but how had they managed to hide the sickles from him? When they are away from home, Ethan carries his sickle in his boots — which is why he wears them a few sizes larger — while his father keeps his in his senator's briefcase. When he used to run, he kept it in a leather holster under his jacket. Caroline, on the other hand, carries her sickle in her handbag. But when they are at home... Ethan stands up and walks to the cigar-holding Indian statue. He presses a hidden button, and the wooden box the Indian carries opens. Inside are the sickles. The statue was Fergus and Caroline's gift to Ethan when he earned his sickle. The Indian can hold up to four sickles: until now, the only one missing has been Joe's.

Set 10 – Yellowstone

Before beginning the construction of the ranch — starting with choosing the location — Frances and Joe follow Dunya and Brooke to Yellowstone. They want to see the aunt, embrace Frog again, speak with Bless, and live for a while as true Vikindians. At the Indian encampment there is great celebration for their arrival. Frances apologizes to Bless for having tried to kill him, and he replies by quoting Shakespeare. Frog is extremely busy rehearsing together with Khulan. Joe speaks with his aunt. He asks her why she wanted Frog to travel with him. She exposed him to enormous risks. Johanna then begins to explain. Frog is indeed a Native American, but he is not the grandson of the Indian chief. Frog is a Vikindian — and he is Joe's cousin. He is Johanna's grandson and President Lincoln's grandson. Because she and Lincoln had met again, only once, years later when the President was on an election tour in the West. From that meeting — and from the night that followed — a daughter was born: Mary Ann. But Johanna had not even told Abe about her. She took the child west with her and raised her as a Vikindian, intending to make her a great shaman, and therefore wanted her to absorb as much as possible of Indian culture. She was beautiful, intelligent, and powerful, and many fell in love with her. She chose "White Deer," the younger son of the Shoshone chief of the time, "Sky of the Prairie." They gave him that name because, as soon as he let out his first cry as a newborn, a huge white deer ran out of the forest and disappeared into the plains. White Deer, famous for his courage in battle, and Mary Ann had a child: Frog. During childbirth Mary Ann suffered complications, and it became necessary to send her to Adonia in Santorini to

recover her health. White Deer decided to go with her. They were to embark in Philadelphia, but waiting for them were two assassins of the Grand Druid — whom Johanna now knows to have been O'Hara and Marlowe — and they fell into an ambush before boarding. Mary Ann had not yet earned her sickle, and therefore could do nothing against their ouroboroi. White Deer tried to protect her, but in vain. His knife, when striking the attackers, crumbled without leaving a scratch on them, and the two assassins finished him with a dagger blow. The bodies were sent back to the tribe through Indian Affairs thanks to the work of Fergus who, incidentally, never knew that Mary Ann was his niece. They are both buried just a little way up from here. Unfortunately, Johanna had not been able to travel with them that time because she was taking care of Frog. Otherwise, those two henchmen would have been dust long ago. As soon as she learned of her daughter's death, Johanna — devastated by grief — entrusted her grandson to the women of the Indian chief, who promised to treat him as a son. Johanna then dedicated all her time to hunting downKellan. Johanna had never told Frog that she was his grandmother before Constantinople, and those in the tribe who knew had kept it from him. She had always stayed close to him, but she never wanted to influence him — neither to make him a great warrior like his father nor a great Vikindian like herself. He needed to gain confidence in himself and discover his own power. That is why she wanted him to go with Joe, and why she arranged for him to go to Ganja. She always watched over him — even during the days of imprisonment at the fort. In that circumstance, she visited him every day in the form of a prairie dog, and on the day of the execution she was there, ready to free her grandson. But with Joe present, she knew nothing would happen to him. Moreover, at the first postal outpost, she

had secretly stolen — in the form of a mouse — Joe's letter to his father and carried it in flight all the way to Washington. She used the same stratagem for the return. In this way, precious days were saved. Had she not done so, the letter would never have arrived in time. And the Pony Express horse that arrived at the fort at breakneck speed — that was her. Frances wants to know why the tattoo did not work on Frog. Johanna replies that the tattoo *did* imprint itself on Frog, but it did not function because he did not know he was a Vikindian, nor was he aware of having a power. Kellan's tattoo — the product of dark powers — would not imprint itself on those who possessed such awareness, while it would imprint but not function on Vikindians who lacked that awareness. And in any case, tattooing a Vikindian always required their consent. Frances had granted hers, but Frog would never have allowed it. This is also why the aunt never told Frog the truth. That way, if Kellan captured him, the tattoo would not work. And for this reason she was not overly worried, knowing he was in the hands of the Grand Druid. But if Frog, Joe, and Frances were Vikindians, why did the plants not turn green in their presence? Johanna answers that the power over plants is acquired when one becomes aware of who one is and of one's own power. Now Joe can revive plants as well. Johanna picks up a dry twig from the ground and places it in her nephew's hand. The twig turns green, buds appear, and flowers and leaves bloom. Frances, however, had lost that power for as long as she was tattooed. She places her hand on the twig as well, and two apples grow and ripen. Nevertheless, Frances has learned to summon the Forces of Nature, and she still retains that ability. She will have to teach it to the others. Frances says she is more than willing. Johanna also asks her to take care of Frog and help him develop his power and gain influence over plants. He has not yet

developed either ability properly, and therefore he still has to earn his sickle. Frog arrives and joins the conversation to invite them to take their seats and watch the play. It will be *Hamlet*, of course — but translated into Cherokee and set on the plains: Hamlet is an Indian chief. Bless wrote the adaptation, and Frog and Johanna contributed to the translation. The boy greets his grandmother affectionately and heads backstage. Frances stops him and, announcing that she is now his tutor, asks how he plans to ride dolphins here on the plains. Frog reassures her, saying that this continent has no shortage of dolphins — in the St. Lawrence River to the north, and along both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. He will simply have to shuttle between the plains and the great waterlands. Johanna encourages her grandson, who walks off toward the stage. A white sheet is stretched between two teepees, with fires lit in front to illuminate the scene. As the three of them settle into the front row, Johanna tells Joe and Frances that when Frog has fully awakened to his power and grown into a Vikindian, she will leave him command of the American tribe. A tray with cups passes around. Its Wanige. Johanna says she prepared it herself. The secret of the drink is what in the West is called ergot — a fungal mold that helps one dream and sleep blissfully. But this lighter Wanige is meant only to help them enjoy the Shakespeare-Indian stories even more.

Set 11 – Greenland

The Vikindian village on the coast of Greenland stands protected inside an energy bubble where it is spring, with blooming plants and a springtime farmyard. The bubble reaches the sea as well, and someone is swimming. All around it, there is ice and snow. On a rise above the village stands a stone building where many elderly Vikindians — among them Manfreda — and Indian shamans sit in a circle, playing drums and an ivory flute carved from a walrus tusk. On that flute, an ouroboros is engraved in the ivory. Abbot McAllan rises and steps into the center. He focuses on the music. The others rise as well, and as McAllan walks outside, they follow him, continuing to play. Outside, at night, they reach a cliff. Before taking his leave, the abbot hands Manfreda his sickle and tells her to keep it for the child Joe and Frances will one day have. Then Brendon steps to the edge of the cliff, looking out over the sea, and begins to dissolve into stardust that rises into the sky until it becomes a constellation.

Sets 12

It is night, and in the sky shines the constellation into which Abbot McAllan has transformed. Lincoln is at the White House, lying on a long chair on the semicircular balcony of the south façade. The President gazes at the sky, enchanted. Aunt Johanna watches him from a tree in the garden. Garibaldi is in Nysiros, bathing in the moonlight around the volcano. Custer stands on

the walls of the fort, looking at the stars. The Yellowstone tribe sits before an improvised stage where Bless, Frog, and Khulan perform *Hamlet*. The Pope rides his white horse under the stars on a racetrack in Rome, with the cardinal and Demidoff timing him. The Sultan and Parodi are in the Topkapi Gardens drinking coffee served by Baris. In the meanwhile Joe and Frances, embraced on their porch, look at the stars, with Nestor and the mare in the background exchanging gestures of affection. In Florence, Poniatowski is in a house near Porta Pinti, helping a poor family by distributing food and clothing. Emilio is staging a puppet show for the young patients of a children's hospital. There are nuns in the audience. One of them has a golden sickle at her belt.

Set 13 – Cheyenne, five years later

A package arrives for Joe by mail. It comes directly from Washington, from the General Secretariat of Indian Affairs. Inside there is a newspaper and a handwritten report. The handwriting is Johanna's. On the front page of the newspaper, in huge letters, it reads: *Attempt on the President Fails*. And the subheading: *Lincoln is in the hospital but in good condition*. The article to which the headline refers states at one point: *A cat, which somehow entered the presidential box, attacked the assailant just as he was aiming his pistol, so the President was only grazed in a non-vital spot. Lincoln was admitted to the hospital, somewhat shaken by the blow and the wound, but by morning he was already up and full of energy. Many witnesses speak of an extraordinary melody that played all night outside*

the hospital — perhaps a musician distressed by the President's condition. In a small article at the bottom of the page, the title reads: *Spring Boom in Washington. Never before seen so many flowers.* In the handwritten report there are additions to the media account. O'Hara — somehow — managed to slip into the theater and reach the presidential box. Things went badly for him because, as guests of the Lincolns, Auwory and Bonaparte were present, visiting Aunt Zénaïde Bonaparte who, married to an American ornithologist, has lived in the United States for years. With the excuse of birds, the two — both Vikindians — can come and go from the forests and from the Indians without attracting attention. Bonaparte foresaw the danger and warned the President, who replied that he would do nothing and, above all, that the four of them were not to intervene and no one would be harmed — except the attacker. As expected, O'Hara entered the box and fired. Abe, already prepared, just as O'Hara pulled the trigger, drew the sickle he always keeps inside his top hat and first deflected the shot — which grazed his shoulder — and then made the last of Kellan's druids vanish in a flash of magnesium. Those present in the theater attributed the flash to the attacker's gunshot and paid little attention to it. According to the press, after the theater the assailant fled but was caught and killed by the police. The body, the newspapers say, was burned as a *damnatio memoriae*.

Final Set – Yellowstone

Johanna and her grandson stand before the graves of Frog's parents. The burial mounds lie in a clearing near a bluff overlooking the entire valley. Johanna bends over the mounds

and makes many flowers bloom. Frog watches her, and his grandmother tells him that soon he will be able to do the same. But he will have to work hard to earn the sickle. They return to the path leading back to the camp. Frog asks Johanna what his grandfather Abe's power is, and she replies that... he is immune to bullets.